SHARKBOY AND LAVAGIRL ADVENTURES

VOL. 2

RETURN TO PLANET DROOL

ROBERT RODRIGUEZ
AND
CHRIS ROBERSON

Bay View Academy
Charter School
222 Casa Verde Way
Monterey, CA 93940

SHARKBOY AND LAVAGIRL ADVENTURES

BOOK 2
RETURN TO PLANET DROOL

BY
ROBERT RODRIGUEZ
&
CHRIS ROBERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY
ALEX TOADER

TROUBLEMAKER
PUBLISHING

DIMENSION
FILMS

SHARK BOY AND LAVA GIRL ADVENTURES:
BOOK 2: RETURN TO PLANET DROOL
Copyright © 2005 Troublemaker Publishing, LP
All Rights Reserved

A Troublemaker Publishing Book
www.troublemakerstudios.com

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the publisher.

First Edition
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN: 1-933104-05-8

The text for this book was set in Cheltenham and Centurio.

Manufactured in the United States of America

SHARKBOY
AND
LAVAGIRL
ADVENTURES

BEYOND THE MOONS OF MAGELLAN
IN A PLACE AS FAR AS IT SEEMS,
ACROSS A SEA OF STARS
AND NINE SEAS OF DREAMS
IT IS NOT TOO FAR
AND IT'S NOT TOO CLOSE,
IT COULD BE AS FAR
AS THE TIP OF YOUR NOSE
IT'S A PLANET OF FUN
WHERE ALL THE KIDS RULE
IT'S A DAYDREAMER'S PLACE
IT'S CALLED PLANET DROOL.

MOON
EARTH
VOLCANO
EMERGENT SEA
MALON
VENT
MIND FIELDS
MOUNT NEVEREST
GAMES
RIDES
FUN
DREAM GRAVEYARD
NOCTURNE CAVERNS
PASSAGE OF TIME
PLANET DROOB
N
4° 23' 50"
E
26° 06' 50"
THE ABOVE TRUE NUMBERS ARE YOUR POINT OF START.
DREAM ACROSS THE SOUTHERN SKIES AND YOU'LL SEE THE MARK
1 Km
POP. UNKNOWN
LEGEND

Chapter One

Shark Boy stood in the Sharkcave, looking at a map of the world, wondering where he had left to search.

The Sharkcave was a grotto, a little underwater cave just off the shore of a deserted island in the South Pacific. Carved by the passage of hot lava from the island's now dormant volcano centuries ago, the walls of the cave were smooth and even, and enclosed a still pool of water. It was almost like a fishbowl turned upside down, but instead of water inside and breathable air outside, the cave was full of breathable air, surrounded on all sides by the cool blue waters of the Pacific Ocean. Running around the edge of the deep blue hole was a wide shelf of sand-covered stone. Shark Boy's bed was

a cavity carved into the solid rock walls, his furniture made of bits of driftwood, pieces of coral, and parts of sunken ships.

A large blue shark bobbed on the surface of the water, watching Shark Boy eagerly with eyes like polished black glass. The Sharksub was moored at the water's edge, fueled and ready.

<*Leave now?*> the shark asked. <*Now? Swim now?*>

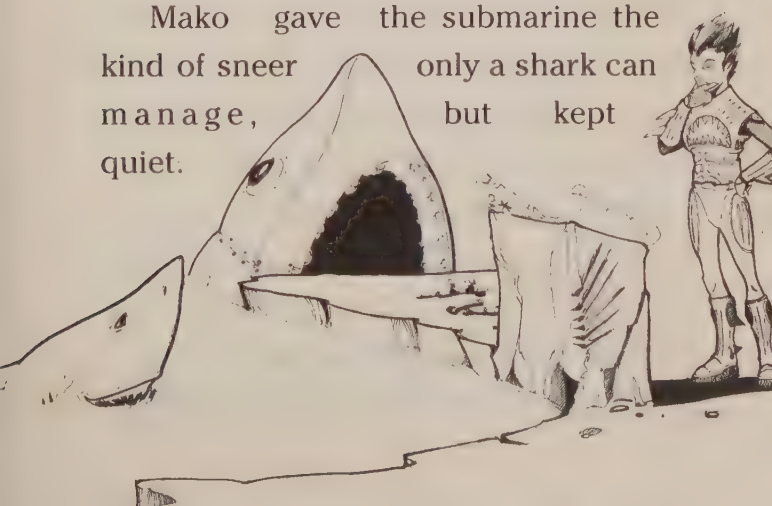
"Hang on a minute, Mako," Shark Boy answered, not turning around. "I'm thinking."

The blue shark scowled, as only sharks can, and cast its black gaze at the Sharksub. The shark gave itself a slight push with a ventral fin, gliding through the still water towards the sub, and then swatted the vehicle's metal hull with its tail. The sub rattled like a metal drum, vibrating from the force of the shark's blow.

<Not swim in metal skin. True swim. Like shark.>

"I don't have time to play right now, Mako," Shark Boy said with a weary sigh. He'd been through this fight before with the blue shark, and he was getting tired of repeating himself. "And I *need* the sub to reach all the places I need to go. If I tried to swim all of this"—he indicated the map of the world with a sweep of his hand—"it would take me *forever*. The Sharksub can move a whole lot faster, and cover more ground than I ever could under my own steam."

Mako gave the submarine the kind of sneer only a shark can manage, but kept quiet.



Shark Boy stepped back from the map, hands on his hips. Hung in a frame of riveted steel salvaged from a sunken World War II battleship, the map of Earth showed both the landmasses—shaded from the yellows of the desert plains to the greens of forests to the purples and whites of mountain peaks—and the oceans, with the seafloor elevations marked out in shades of blue, blue-green, and gray. In his long searches these last few months, Shark Boy had kept track of his progress by sticking yellow pushpins in all of the spots on the seafloor he'd checked. Now, looking at the map, he could scarcely see a hint of blue. All of the bodies of water were covered by thick forests of yellow plastic pushpins.

"I've looked *everywhere*!"

The blue shark sliced back and forth across the surface of the water.

<Don't look anymore. Swim now.>

Shark Boy could hear the words of the

shark in his head, just like he first had years ago. Even more than the shark's words themselves, though, just hearing the shark's voice tempted Shark Boy to give up on his search and go play. The shark's voice suggested carefree days spent swimming and hunting in the ocean depths, far from the things of man, whiling away days and hours and weeks in the simple pleasures of the sea.

But he couldn't give up the search! Shark Boy was on a mission, and wouldn't give up until it was done.

"There's nowhere else to look," Shark Boy said, desperately looking for any stretch of blue left uncovered on the map. "And I still haven't found him."

A memory bubbled up, from somewhere deep in Shark Boy's mind. Something someone had said to him, not long ago.

"He won't be in the places you look for him, but you'll find him in the last place

you think to search."

When had that been? Shark Boy bit his lip with sharp, pointed teeth and paced back and forth along the water's edge. Who had said that? The memory seemed buried under a fog, indistinct and difficult to view, like a mountaintop hidden by a cloudbank. Almost as if the memories surrounding that one recollection were separated out, distinct, as though it had happened when Shark Boy didn't *have* any other memories.

Shark Boy's eyes snapped open, wide.

That was it! It had been when the Darkness fell in the Realm of Dreams, when Shark Boy had lost his memory. The old man in the mechanical man of brass and rivets had given him the palmtop computer and had said those words.

At the time, Shark Boy hadn't understood. How could he, without knowing anything about who he was, or where he came from? He'd asked who the

old man had meant. The Day Dreamer?

"No," the old man had said, a sadness in his voice. *"Your father."*

Shark Boy turned away from the map, and opened the hatch on the Sharksub.

"I'm going away for a while, Mako. I'm leaving you in charge."

The blue shark swum back and forth in the pool, anxiously, as Shark Boy climbed into the submarine.

<*Where do you go? Why?*>

Shark Boy leaned his head out the hatch, the engines beginning to hum, the propeller screws starting to turn.

"I've got to get back to the Realm of Dreams," Shark Boy said. "I've got to go back to Planet Drool and find my father."

Chapter Two

Shark Boy had known it wouldn't be easy to reach the Realm of Dreams. Last time, it had taken the power of the Day Dreamer to open a portal between the worlds of waking and of dreams. To get back, Shark Boy would have to find another doorway.

Lucky for him, he had a good idea where to find one.

A few months back, during his search for his father, Shark Boy had caught sight of a city at the bottom of the sea. A city of light in an ocean of darkness, of heat in an ocean of cold. A city of dreams in the waking world.

It was the city of Vent. One of the Twilight Places, Vent straddled the border between the Waking World and the Realm

of Dreams. It existed in both places at once, but wasn't wholly a part of either. It was a space in between spaces. It was unique. But then, so was its queen.

He'd not seen the queen of Vent since they'd both left the Realm of Dreams, after the Darkness had been dispelled and the Day Dreamer restored to his power. He knew that if anyone could help him, though, it would be her.

Once he reached the city of Vent, though, Shark Boy became much less certain. The smell was the first sign things weren't going right, and things went downhill from there.

Shark Boy's submarine had glided through the airlock into the dome surrounding the city of Vent. He piloted the sub along the narrow canal that led to the main dock. Once the Sharksub was safely moored, he popped the hatch and climbed out. A pair of strange creatures were making their way towards him. They

looked like part-spider, part-crab, big hard-shelled bodies held up at eye level on the ends of eight big, jointed legs.

The air smelled like rotten eggs, or like someone nearby had just passed gas. A *lot* of gas.

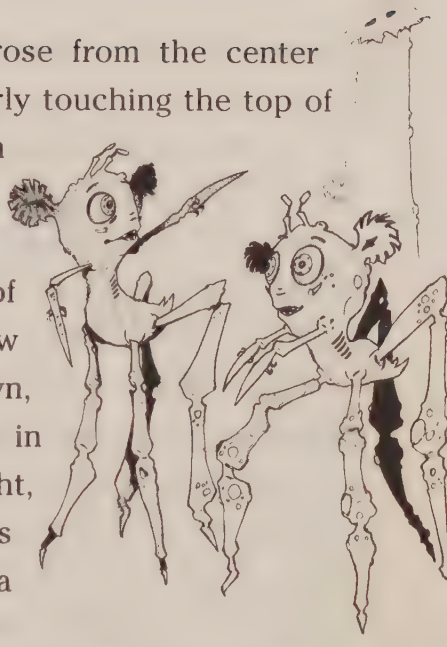
Shark Boy didn't want to be rude, but he just couldn't help himself. The stench was almost overpowering. As the two spider-crabs approached, he pinched his nose shut with the fingers of one hand while waving the other hand in front of his face to fan the air away.

"What died in here?" he said, his voice sounding comically nasal through his pinched nose.

The two spider-crabs regarded each other for a moment, glassy eyes moving on the end of segmented stalks, and then turned their attention back to Shark Boy.

"It is the sulfur, yes?" one of them said. It raised a segmented leg to point overhead.

A volcano rose from the center of the city, nearly touching the top of the dome. From the volcano's glowing top little flecks of greenish-yellow drifted down, like dust motes in a beam of light, or seed pollens falling from a tree in spring.



"We in the city, we live on the sulfur that issues forth from the vent," the other spider-crab added. "But to people of your type, it smells like . . . What was the word her majesty used, Oxo?" The spider-crab flicked its eyestalks at the other.

"She called it 'flatulence,' Xox," the other answered.

"Ah, yes," the spider-crab said, twitching its eyestalks appreciatively. It

turned its attention back to Shark Boy. "It smells like flatulence."

"I *know*!" Shark Boy pleaded. "Can you take me to see Lava Girl already?"

The two spider-crabs advanced, each raising two segmented arms with pincers on their ends.

"But of course we will take you to see the queen," one of them said.

"After all, you *are* under arrest, and all prisoners must be brought to Her Majesty for sentencing."

"Under arrest?!" Shark Boy said, dropping his hand from his nose in surprise and immediately regretting it. He cupped both hands over his nose and mouth and tried to take shallow breaths. "Whatever. Just take me to see her, okay?"

The creatures took firm hold of Shark Boy in their segmented arms, and led him through the foul-smelling streets to the palace at the volcano's base. They passed more of the spider-crabs along the way,

along with tall, worm-like creatures, and others even stranger.

"If you will wait here," one of the creatures said, depositing Shark Boy on the polished marble floor of the rotunda, "the sergeant at arms will be along momentarily to escort you into the throne room."

"I'm sure you won't have long to wait before sentence is carried out," said the other creature helpfully. "And I understand that the execution methods they use nowadays are virtually painless."

"Um, thanks?" Shark Boy said, unsure how to respond. The two creatures scuttled away, leaving him alone in the middle of the large room.

He wasn't alone for long. A heartbeat after the two spider-crabs had left the room, another entered by a side door. This one, though, was quite a bitter taller than the others, with the majority of his body carapace painted bright blue, and

with bands of gold painted on each of his many joints.

"I am the sergeant at arms," the spider-crab said, his eyestalks twitching Shark Boy's direction for just a moment. "And you will please accompany me, or I'm afraid I will have to do violence to your person."

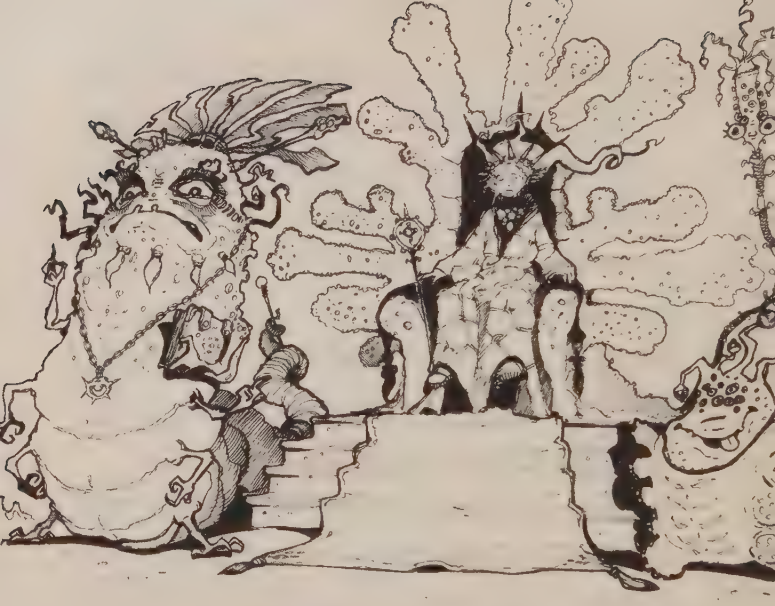
Shark Boy shrugged. He was just glad that the thick stone walls of the palace seemed to keep out most of the sulfur, as it didn't smell nearly as bad in here as outside. He followed the spider-crab through a wide doorway, hoping that it might smell even better through there.

He found himself in a grand throne room, all but empty. He and the spider-crab sergeant at arms stood at one end, while at the far end stood a tall throne, a chair shaped of an immense piece of polished coral. On the chair sat the queen, resplendent and bright in a flowing gown of green, with a crown of coral studded

with pearls on her head, her pink hair in neat braids that curved down her back. At her side was a tall, wormlike creature similar to the ones Shark Boy had seen out in the streets of the city. Its body was about as big around as a tree trunk, the sort of off-white of a day-old boiled egg, and from its head plumed a bright red tuft, almost like a flag.

"Your Majesty," the sergeant at arms said, bowing slightly by dipping forward on its segmented legs. His eyestalks turned to the enormous tubeworm, and he bowed slightly again. "Your Excellency, the grand vizier," he added deferentially. "I present to you this prisoner, who is guilty of trespassing, and of whatever other offenses you deem appropriate, brought before you for sentencing."

"He is guilty, Your Majesty," the tubeworm vizier said, almost before the sergeant at arms had finished speaking. "I recommend the harshest possible—"



"If he's guilty of anything," the queen said, interrupting the vizier with a wave of her hand, "it's of having bad timing." She turned to Shark Boy with a weary smile. "How are you doing, Sharkie?"

Shark Boy shrugged.

"Not too bad, I guess, Lava Girl. How about you?"

Chapter Three

"I'm bored stiff, Shark Boy," Lava Girl said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Ever since we got back from Planet Drool, I haven't been able to have any fun at all. Nothing but boring administrative stuff. Signing decrees, hearing disputes, presiding over weddings, baby naming ceremonies, restaurant grand openings—it might sound glamorous to be a queen, but trust me, it isn't!"

Lava Girl leaned forward, a light flaring in her eyes.

"So tell me!" she said. "You're on some adventure, right? And you need my help?"

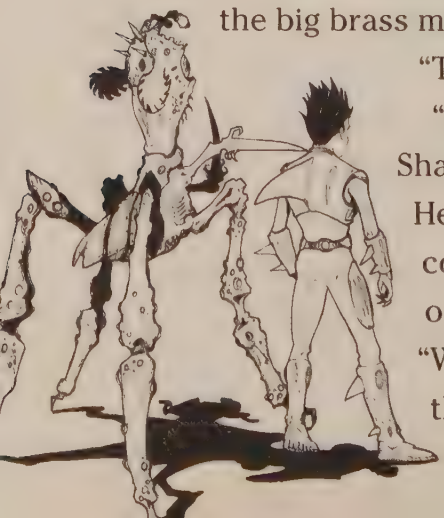
She sounded so eager, Shark Boy almost couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth.

"Um, not really, I'm afraid," he finally admitted. "I really just need help getting back to the Realm of Dreams, and I thought you could tell me the best route out of Vent."

Lava Girl's shoulders slumped as she deflated with disappointment.

"No adventure?" she said, dejected. Then she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "But why do you need to go back to the Realm of Dreams? I thought you were looking for your dad on Earth."

"I was. But now I think he might be on Planet Drool. Remember that old guy in the big brass machine?"



"The Imagineer?"

"Yeah, him." Shark Boy nodded. He took a palmtop computer out of his pocket. "When he gave me this computer,

he told me that I wouldn't find my father where I looked for him, but that he'd be in the last place I thought to search."

"So where's that?" Lava Girl asked. "Where's the last place?"

"I don't know." Shark Boy smacked a fist into the palm of his other hand. "How should I know? I haven't *thought* of it yet. No, see, what I'm thinking is that the Imagineer knew more about my father than he let on."

"So you're going to go look for him, and see what else he can tell you?"

Shark Boy nodded.

"Your Majesty," the vizier said, interrupting, "if you can sentence this prisoner, we can get on with the business of the day. We've got quite a few decrees for you still to sign."

Lava Girl waved the vizier aside angrily, and turned back to Shark Boy. She smiled meaningfully.

"Where are you going to look for the

old man?" she asked.

"Well," Shark Boy answered, "he talked about living underground with the old dreams, whatever that meant. I figured I'd go to Nocturne Cavern and start searching there. I've heard rumors about a system of caves and tunnels that riddle Planet Drool like Swiss cheese, but I've never been down there myself."

Lava Girl snapped her fingers, sending up little puffs of smoke.

"Well, then, I suppose I'll *have* to go with you," she said, jumping to her feet, "since I've spent a little time down below myself. That's where lava comes from, after all. I've not done much more than ride the magma highways from one place to another, of course, but my experience will still come in handy, I'm sure. And there is a *lot* of hot lava down there, so you'll no doubt need my help."

"Your Majesty, I must protest . . ." the vizier began, the red plume on the top of

his worm body rustling furiously.

"Yeah," Shark Boy said with a distracted shrug. "I thought about you coming along, at first, but I figured you'd be too busy being queen and all. Besides, I'm sure I can manage on my own."

"No!" Lava Girl said excitedly. "That is, I *am* busy, of course, but not too busy to help a friend in need. I suppose I could always leave the vizier in charge for a while."

The vizier vibrated with anxiety, his voice thick with concern.

"But Your Majesty," the worm-creature said, "last time you were gone so long that our city was almost lost to the chill and the gloom. If you were to go away, and anything were to happen to you . . ."

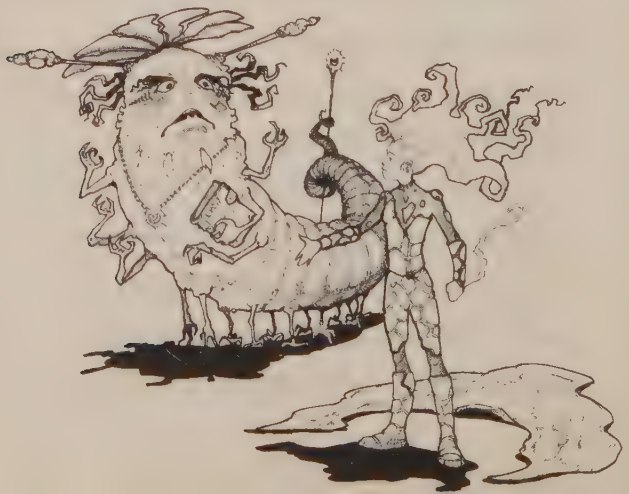
"You've got nothing to worry about," Lava Girl assured him, taking off her crown and dropping it on the throne's cushioned seat. "I'll be back in more than enough time to keep the home fires burning. The

city of Vent won't freeze, I promise."

Lava Girl didn't wait for the vizier to object. Stripping off her green gown to reveal her purple, pink, and brown lavasuit underneath, she hurried across the floor, grabbed Shark Boy by the elbow, and dragged him out of the throne room through a side passage.

The vizier turned to the sergeant at arms, the worm's red plume vibrating uneasily.

"Have you ever considered starting up a democracy, Your Excellency?" the spider-creature asked, his eyestalks twitching with faint amusement.



Chapter Four

They needed to reach the surface in a way that both of them could survive. Lava Girl usually traveled to and from the city through the red-hot veins of Planet Drool itself, swimming through the coursing lava. Shark Boy couldn't go that route, of course; he'd be fried to a crisp in an instant. Nor could Shark Boy swim to the surface, since the ice-cold waters outside the city would freeze Lava Girl solid, extinguishing her light and heat forever. Their only option was for Lava Girl to ride with Shark Boy in his Sharksub, trying to keep her flames cool enough that she didn't drain him dry in the process.

They couldn't go back the way that Shark Boy had come, though. If they did,

they'd run the risk of winding up right back on Earth.

"I don't know, Shark Boy," Lava Girl said, squeezing into the passenger seat and fastening her seat belt. "Every time I've gone outside the walls of Vent, I've always found myself on Planet Drool. And every time I went looking for Vent, I found it on Planet Drool, too."

"Did you ever look for it on Earth?" Shark Boy asked with a sly smile, turning on the sub's engines.

"Well, no, not really," Lava Girl said sheepishly.

"Neither did I, but I found it there anyway." Shark Boy thumbed a switch, and the hatch closed tight behind them. "It's really true that Vent exists in both places. But maybe you have to be standing in just the right spot to see it."

"Or be the right kind of person," Lava Girl said.

Shark Boy shrugged, and piloted the

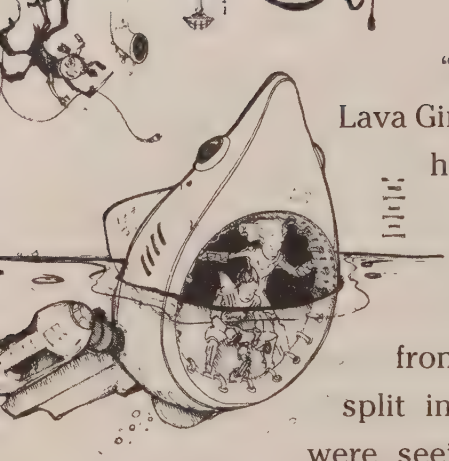
sub back out into the canal.

"Head to the other exit, on the far side of the city," Lava Girl instructed, pointing ahead through the viewport. "That's the way I always leave, and I've never accidentally found myself on Earth." She was being sarcastic, Shark Boy knew, but underneath he could tell she wasn't sure quite what would happen.

"There's always a first time." Shark Boy smiled.

They reached the airlock, and waited as the huge door closed behind them. They found themselves between two clear walls, the air-filled city behind them, the dark waters of the ocean in front. The space between the walls began to fill with seawater that rose in gentle, lapping waves up the sides of the submarine.

When the airlock had filled completely with water, the wall in front of them opened up, and they eased forward into the seawater.



"Look at that!" Lava Girl pointed ahead, her eyes wide.

It seemed for a moment as if the world in front of them was split in two—like they were seeing two images, one laid on top of the other. One was the murky, cold depths of the South Pacific Ocean. The other was the more brightly lit, spangled depths of Planet Drool's Emergent Sea.

"Have you ever seen this before?" Shark Boy asked, checking the sub's readouts. Everything read normal across the board.

"No," Lava Girl answered in a breathless whisper. She glanced over at Shark Boy. "I wonder if it's because I'm with you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's almost as if you're the

product of both worlds, not one or the other. Not just a dream-self or a waking-self, but somehow both."

Shark Boy bit his lip, thinking it over.

"I'm not sure, to be honest," he said. "I guess you're right, though, that I'm not really one or the other. Maybe that's why I always spend so much time in both worlds. Maybe I don't really belong anywhere."

"Or maybe you belong *everywhere*. Did that occur to you?"

Shark Boy glanced over at her and gave her a slight smile.

"Who knows?" he said, forcing a shrug. "We'll have to figure it out later. Maybe if we find my dad . . . no, *when* we find my dad, maybe he'll help me figure it out."

Lava Girl reached out a cooled-down hand and patted Shark Boy lightly on the shoulder. The fabric of his sharksuit steamed at her touch, the last bits of moisture in the fabric boiling away.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go."

Shark Boy steered the Sharksub away from Vent, keeping his eyes and attention on the Emergent Sea, trying to ignore the Pacific Ocean. It was almost as if he and Lava Girl were wishing themselves into the Realm of Dreams, as though they were trying to believe it hard enough that it came true. And really, he supposed, that's what they were trying to do.

In the end, the murky reaches of the Pacific Ocean faded from view, leaving only the sparkling depths of the Emergent Sea, the largest body of water on the face of Planet Drool. Shark Boy was back in familiar waters now.

Chapter Five

Shark Boy and Lava Girl stood on the mossy stones, looking down into the dark mouth of Nocturne Cavern. The cave beyond the opening was dark and hidden, but they could hear the wind whistling over the cave mouth, sounding deep, and hollow, and ominous.

"You first," Lava Girl said, taking a step back.

They had landed the Sharksub on the shores of the Emergent Sea, not far from the entrance to Nocturne Cavern. Shark Boy had led the way with his palmtop computer, which had provided all sorts of interesting facts about the cavern, along with precise directions to it. The cavern was supposed to be one of the wonders of the Realm of Dreams, the first in a system

of caves that worked its way through the whole planet, stretching from one side to the other. Few had tried to explore the hidden depths of the cave system, and of those who had tried, not all of them had returned.

Surprising, then, that the mouth of the cave would be so small and uninspiring. The entrance to Nocturne Cavern, overgrown with ivy and mosses, wasn't much bigger than a regular doorway. Still, darkness lurked beyond that small entrance. Darkness and the unknown.

It took Shark Boy a few moments to realize that he hadn't moved yet, that he hadn't even answered.

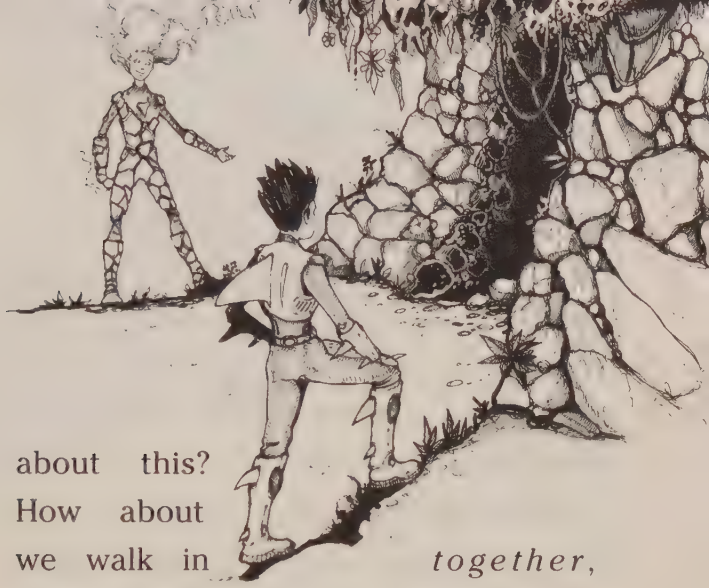
"Um, why don't *you* go first, instead," he finally answered.

Lava Girl shook her head, arms crossed over her chest.

"Uh-uh," she said. "I don't *think* so."

Shark Boy gave a ragged sigh.

"All right, all right," he said. "How



about this? How about we walk in *together*, side by side. Is that fair?"

Lava Girl thought about it for a long moment, and finally nodded.

"Let's go," she said, stepping forward and waiting for Shark Boy to join her.

The rocks at the cave mouth were slippery with damp and moss, and they had to watch their step. A few yards into the gloom, Shark Boy glanced back over his shoulder and could barely see a hint of blue sky past the entrance. The cavern around them was dark, and getting darker

with every step they took.

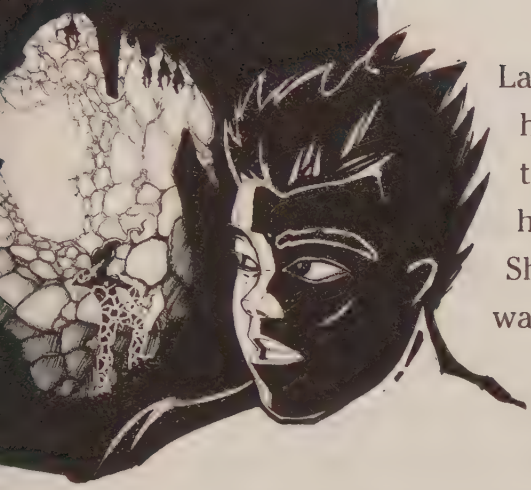
The only illumination was the faint glow from Lava Girl, light radiating out from her along with heat. Shark Boy could see pretty well, since his eyes were used to the deepest reaches of the ocean; but Lava Girl was having trouble.

"I can't see *anything*," she said. "Just my hand in front of my face."

"Well," Shark Boy answered, "your hand *is* on fire, which has got to help."

"I'm going to have to turn up the heat a bit," Lava Girl said, not amused. "If I don't, I might just trip in the dark and break my leg, and then where would you be?"

Shark Boy shrugged, and averted his eyes slightly as Lava Girl began to glow brighter. She seemed satisfied, which was enough for him, but after a few more steps, Shark Boy could feel his skin beginning to dry out. Walking side by side through the cavern wasn't going to work. He could see well enough to get along in the dark, but if



Lava Girl got hot enough to light her way, Shark Boy was going to end up as dry as a mummy.

They ended up compromising. Shark Boy walked ahead, taking the lead, and Lava Girl followed behind, her heat turned up just high enough that she could see to follow him.

They walked like that, Shark Boy in front, Lava Girl following close behind, for what seemed like forever. It probably wasn't more than ten or fifteen minutes, but down in the darkness, with nothing but cool, damp air on all sides, and the faraway sound of slowly dripping water, time seemed to slow to a crawl.

They moved in and out of caves,

big and small, following a rough path that wound down through narrow passageways and giant caverns alike. When the walls narrowed, and they moved through passages so constricted they could reach out and touch either side with their fingertips, they could see that the walls of the cave were made up of different layers of rock, each layer a slightly different color. Lava Girl said that they were called "strata." On Earth, Shark Boy knew, rock was dirt and dead plants and old animals, pressed together into solid stone over time, and each layer of rock meant hundreds of years, even thousands. What did the layers of color banding the surface of Planet Drool mean, and what was it made out of?

Shark Boy still had the palmtop computer with him, the one that the Imagineer had given him. It wasn't much use as a guide down in the caves, since it just showed the surface of the planet. He

could tell what they were *under,* but not really where they *were*. However, it did have loads of useful information about caves. It didn't tell him what the rocks around them were made up of, but it did have tons of vocabulary words he could use to describe them.

"Do you know what you call those spikes of rock growing up from the ground?" Shark Boy asked, calling back over his shoulder to Lava Girl and pointing to the spires that lined their path.

"How should I know?" Lava Girl answered.

"Stalagmites," Shark Boy said, his face faintly illuminated by the green glow of the palmtop computer's screen. "How about those that are growing down from the ceiling above the stalagmites, like icicles. What are they called?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Stalactites," Shark Boy said. "You

know how to remember which is which?"

Lava Girl didn't answer, just walked along in silence.

"Well, do you?" Shark Boy repeated, slowing down and glancing back over his shoulder.

Lava Girl sighed.

"No," she said dramatically. "How do you remember which is which?"

"It's easy," Shark Boy said, as if he'd always known it, and hadn't just read it off the computer screen. "See, stalactites have to stay 'tight' to the ceiling or they could fall, while stalagmites 'might' someday grow tall enough to touch the ceiling."

Lava Girl pointed at a pillar of stone off to one side of the cavern.

"Well," she said, "what do you call it when the stalagmites and stalactites grow together into a column like that?"

Shark Boy looked at the pillar of stone, then at the computer screen. He punched in a quick series of commands, his tongue

sticking out of the side of his mouth. Finally, he held up his hands in surrender.

"I don't know," he said. "Columns, maybe?"

They came down into a low, wide space. Their voices bounced back at them, echoing off of far walls. Startled, they fell silent, listening to the echoes and the silence beyond.

From the darkened edge of the cavern came a low growl, and a pair of yellow eyes burned in the low light.

"What was that?" Lava Girl said, but Shark Boy didn't have time to respond. It was too late.

An enormous bear with bright red fur was coming right for them, mouth opened in a vicious sneer.

Chapter Six

Shark Boy dove left and Lava Girl dove right as the giant red bear plowed right between them. The bear roared in rage as it passed, the echoes of the bellowing howl rebounding off the low cavern ceiling.

The bear was easily thirty feet long, and would have towered over them if it could have stood up on its hind legs, but even moving on all fours its back still reached almost as high as the ceiling. It was the largest bear that Shark Boy had ever seen, or had even heard of before. And it was enraged.

Shark Boy caught sight of a glint of gold on the bear's back, but then the bear wheeled around and charged back again, this time angling directly towards Shark

Boy. In the darkness of the cave, it knew just where to find them.

It knew where to find them. In the darkness of the cave.

"Lava," Shark Boy shouted out, jumping to one side and barely missing the bear's paw. The bear's muzzle was just a few yards away, and Shark Boy could see the pink gums lining the bear's mouth, its black lips curled in a vicious snarl. Shark Boy felt the heat of the bear's breath on his cheek. He wouldn't be able to stay out of reach for long. "Bright light. Fast!"

"Got it!" Lava Girl answered, and started to glow brighter. "Hey, bear. Over here!"

The bear swung its head around,

training yellow eyes on Lava Girl.

"Keep them covered, Sharkie!"

Shark Boy covered his eyes with his hands. When Lava Girl had increased her light earlier, it had taken him a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. Accustomed to the low light of the caves, his sensitive eyes weren't ready for the glare. His pupils just couldn't dilate fast enough, and it was like going from a darkened room to looking straight at the sun, without any time in between. Shark Boy figured that since the bear could see in the dark at least as well as he could, the bear would

also have the same problems with sudden bright lights.

He was right.

Lava Girl's fires suddenly flared as bright as the noonday sun. Shark Boy, even with his eyes squinted and hidden behind his gloved hands, still had trouble keeping on his feet. The bear wasn't so lucky.

Howling in pain, the bear covered its beady yellow eyes with its massive front paws and toppled over onto its back. Shark Boy saw the glint of gold again between the bear's shoulder blades for the briefest instant as the bear fell.

"Let's go!" Lava Girl yelled, and started running away.

Shark Boy was hot on her heels. He knew as well as she did that in this confined space, surrounded by nothing but cold, dry stone, they didn't stand a chance against a bear that size. They needed room in which to move around

and, if they were lucky, the chance to fight in their natural element—either water or lava would do.

Coming to the far edge of the low cavern, they found themselves at the shores of an underground river that curved off into the darkness like a black ribbon.

From behind, they could hear the sound of the bear coming closer.

"That bright light trick won't work for long," Lava Girl said, glancing back nervously.

"Yeah, not once its eyes adjust to the light," Shark Boy said.

Lava Girl glanced back at the black river.

"It's getting closer," she said.

"How long can you hold your breath?" Shark Boy asked.

"It really doesn't matter," Lava Girl answered. "If I was in the cold water more than a few seconds, all of my heat would

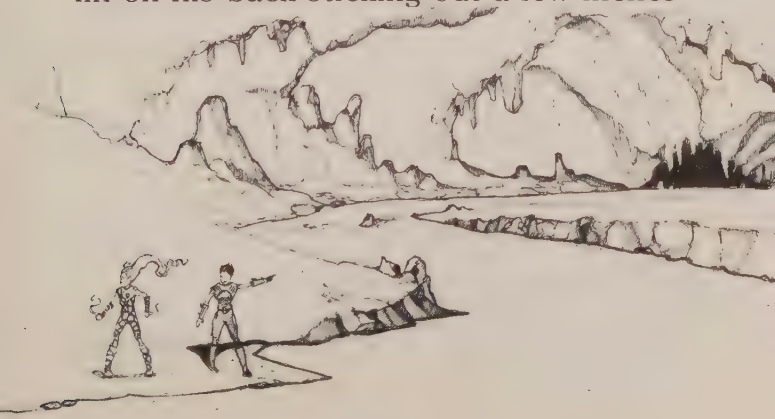
bleed away. I can hold my breath longer than I can survive the cold water."

Shark Boy looked as far down the course of the underground river as possible.

It looks like the ceiling stays a good few feet above the river," Shark Boy said, "at least as far as I can see. I have an idea."

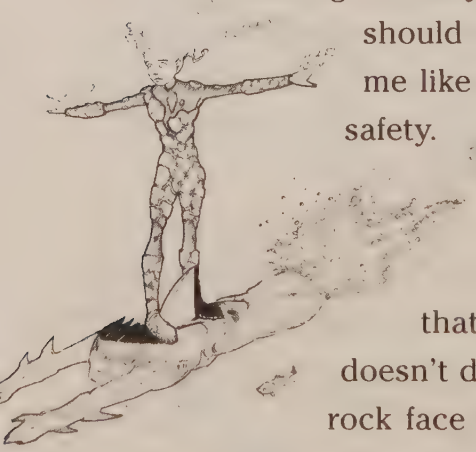
Shark Boy dove into the water, feeling a rush of energy as he did. Even slow-moving, cold water this far underground was his natural element.

He swam back to the river's edge, and floated facedown in place, with his back just cresting the surface of the water, the fin on his back sticking out a few inches



above the water's surface. He turned his head, bringing his face out of the water, and called back to Lava Girl.

"Climb on, Lava. You'll have to cool your feet down as much as possible, to keep from burning my back, but if you can keep your balance—and assuming I can go steady enough—you should be able to ride me like a surfboard to safety.



"Assuming that the river doesn't disappear into a rock face or something," Lava Girl said.

"We'll burn that bridge when we come to it," Shark Boy said.

The bear was almost upon them. They could hear it bellow with rage.

"Come on, Lava Girl. Hurry up!"

Lava Girl stepped gingerly onto Shark Boy's back, facing forward, with a foot on either side of his fin.

"Okay," she said uneasily. "Let's go."

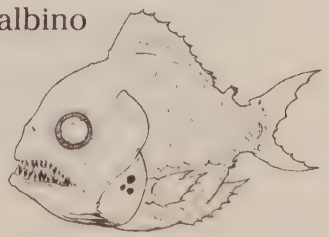
Shark Boy swam away, letting the sluggish river current carry them downstream.

Lava Girl glanced behind and saw that the bear had stopped at the river's edge. She leaned down slightly and shouted so that Shark Boy could hear her through the water.

"I can't tell if he's going to follow us into the water or not, Sharkie."

"We should be all right," Shark Boy answered, with a confidence he didn't feel.

Then he felt something nibbling at his cheek. He looked over, into the blind, sightless eyes of an albino piranha.



<Food!> the piranha said hopefully.

Chapter Seven

Other piranhas joined the first. The water looked like it was boiling, with all the bubbles and splashes they kicked up. The piranhas, having lived so long in the dark caves, appeared to have lost the ability to see, and swam blindly, guided only by vibrations in the water.

<*Food?*> one of the newcomer piranhas said, having heard the call.

<*Where food?*> another piranha asked.

<*Here food,*> answered the piranha who'd first nibbled Shark Boy's cheek.

<*Food!*> the other piranha answered with a cheer.

The piranhas swarmed around. More of them were coming now. They bit and nibbled at Shark Boy, again and again.

Each bite was little more than a nuisance, since his skin was tough and his sharksuit tougher, but with so many of them biting all at once, they would get through sooner or later.

"Hey!" Shark Boy said, calling out to the piranhas. He knew the trick of talking to all fish, but these strange underground creatures were speaking in an accent he'd not heard before. They'd been living on their own in lightless caves for a long, long time.

The piranhas didn't answer, but continued to nibble on him. Some took to jumping over him, like dolphins performing tricks in a circus, taking flying bites at Lava Girl as they passed.

"Shark Boy!" she yelled. "Stop these things. They hurt!"

Shark Boy turned his head and brought his mouth out of the water for a moment. "I'm working on it." Then he turned his attention back to the piranhas. Their little

bites were really starting to hurt now, but he couldn't swat them away. He had to continue swimming steady and straight, or Lava Girl would fall off his back into the cold water. And now she didn't have to worry only about the cold water, or how long she could hold her breath; now she had to worry about being eaten alive by a swarm of hungry albino piranhas.

"Hey, you dumb fish, I'm not food!" Shark Boy yelled.

<Who talk?>

<You talk?>

<No talk.>

"Me talk!" Shark Boy answered, exasperated. "I mean, *I'm* talking. I mean . . . stop biting me!"

Lava Girl was hitting the piranhas that jumped out of the water with little blasts of heat, but as soon as they fell down into the river again they were revived by the cold water.

Shark Boy continued to swim as fast

as he could and still remain steady, but now the piranhas were swarming so thick around them that he could barely see through them.

Lava Girl leaned down and yelled at him, trying to shout over the splashing ruckus of the piranha swarm. "It looks like there's a beach up ahead!" Lava Girl shot a lava burst ahead, like an emergency flare lighting the way.

Shark Boy, lifting his head above water, could see the shore in the flickering light of Lava Girl's flare as it shot past.

"Hang on, Lava," Shark Boy called out over his shoulder. "I think I can make it."

Lava Girl grabbed hold of the fin on Shark Boy's back, squinting her eyes tight

shut against the cold spray of water from all sides.

Shark Boy swam harder, picking up speed, hoping that Lava Girl would be able to keep her balance. He'd given up trying to reason with the fish. He doubted they had encountered anything other than "food" in a long, long time, and he wasn't going to be able to convince them that he and Lava Girl weren't on the menu.

Finally, just when it seemed to Shark Boy that he couldn't take the piranhas' bites a second longer, his hands touched dry ground.

They'd reached the shore. He felt lighter when Lava Girl jumped off his back to dry land, and then he wearily hauled himself up on shore.

Shark Boy climbed unsteadily to his feet. The water at the river's edge frothed with the violent splashing of the piranhas, which snapped their vicious teeth, searching blindly for their prey.

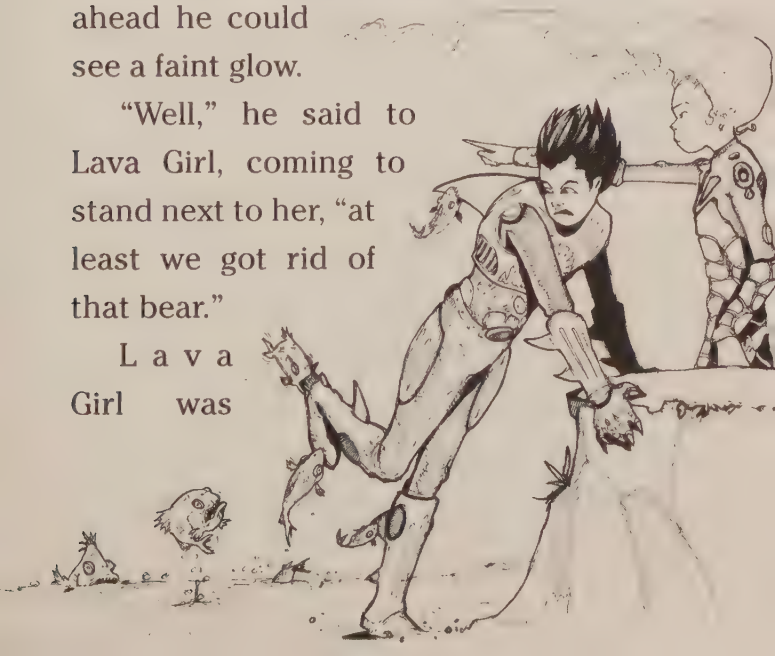
Lava Girl had already retreated a considerable distance away. She stood on the other side of a high-ceilinged cavern, at the mouth of a long, narrow passageway, almost like a hallway formed of living rock.

<*Where food?*> Shark Boy heard a piranha saying.

"We're not food!" he shouted, and then stormed away from the river to join Lava Girl. At the far end of the passageway ahead he could see a faint glow.

"Well," he said to Lava Girl, coming to stand next to her, "at least we got rid of that bear."

Lava Girl was



looking back over Shark Boy's shoulder at the river, her mouth drawn into a tight line. She didn't even say anything, just pointed back the way they'd come, her hands glowing hot in the dim cave light.

Shark Boy glanced back at the river.

The giant red bear was climbing out of the river, dozens of the albino piranhas clinging to its sopping-wet fur. The bear swatted the piranhas off and roared.

"Aw, no," Shark Boy said.

Chapter Eight

Lava Girl tried her bright light trick again. The narrow cave passage was bathed in blinding white light.

"It's not working," Shark Boy said urgently as the bear lumbered closer. The bear's yellow eyes were squinting in the bright light, but the beast wasn't slowing down.

"His eyes adjusted quicker this time, I guess," Lava Girl said. "Any other ideas?"

Shark Boy looked down the passageway.

"We could try to make a run for it," he said, without much enthusiasm.

"He's too fast," Lava Girl answered. "He'd catch us before we got anywhere."

Lava Girl was still glowing hot, the narrow cave passageway still bathed in

blinding white light.

The bear was coming closer, its black lips curled back over pink gums in a vicious snarl.

"We'll just have to stand our ground and fight it out," Lava Girl said.

Shark Boy looked into the ferocious mouth of the giant bear and realized what was missing. He'd first seen it when the bear took a swipe at him on the other side of the river, but it hadn't registered. Only now in the bright light pouring off of Lava Girl did he really understand what he was seeing.

The bear had no teeth. Its sneer was menacing and mean, but there was no bite behind the bark.

"Lava Girl, it doesn't have any teeth!" Shark Boy yelled.

Lava Girl thought about it, and nodded.

"And no claws," she said.

Shark Boy realized she was right. When

the bear had swatted away the piranhas that clung to his fur, they'd flopped safely to the ground and rolled back into the water, without a scratch on them.

The bear didn't have any claws, either.

"So what are we afraid of?" Shark Boy asked.

Lava Girl shrugged.

"It still seems pretty angry," she said.

"Maybe," Shark Boy said. "But I think it's just an old dream. Maybe something that people used to be scared of, but that isn't frightening anymore." Shark Boy looked at the giant bear as it drew ever closer. "But then, why is it still so angry?"

"Maybe it's hurt," Lava Girl said.

Shark Boy remembered the glint of gold that he'd seen on the bear's back. Like something between its shoulder blades. Like something *stuck* between its shoulder blades.

"I've got an idea," Shark Boy said. "Distract it for a second."

Lava Girl nodded, her expression grim.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she said.

"Me, too," Shark Boy said as he sidled to the far side of the passageway.

Lava Girl started waving her arms over her head.

"Hey, bear!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "I'm standing still. Come get me!"

The bear turned its attention to Lava Girl and, throwing back its head, let out a bellowing roar. It charged right for her, with only a short distance to go.

Shark Boy waited until the bear's attention was turned away from him, then raced around behind the bear. It would only take a moment for the bear to realize Shark Boy was behind him, but if Shark Boy was lucky he wouldn't need much more time than that.

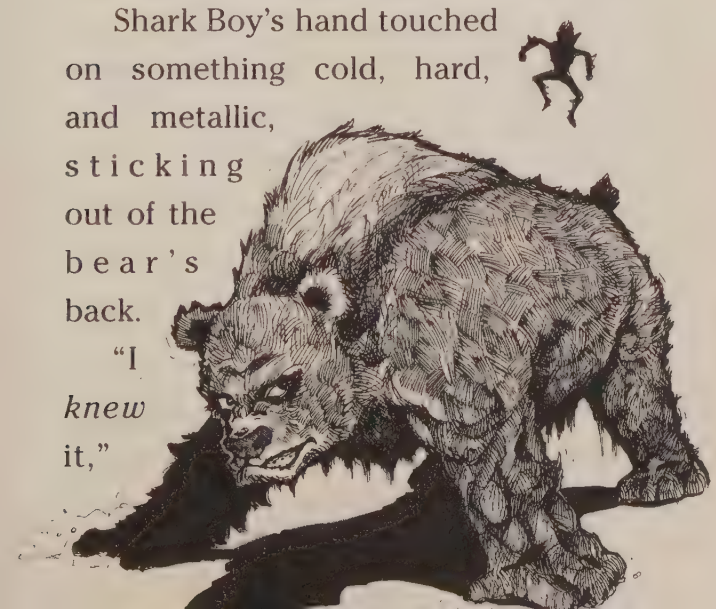
Crouching down like a coiled spring, Shark Boy leapt into the air, landing on the bear's broad back. He clung to the bear's red fur with one hand, searching with the other for the thing he knew had to be there.

The bear was roaring with rage now, trying to grab Shark Boy with its paws. But Shark Boy had calculated correctly, and was safely out of reach. For the moment.

The bear started spinning around, trying to shake Shark Boy loose.

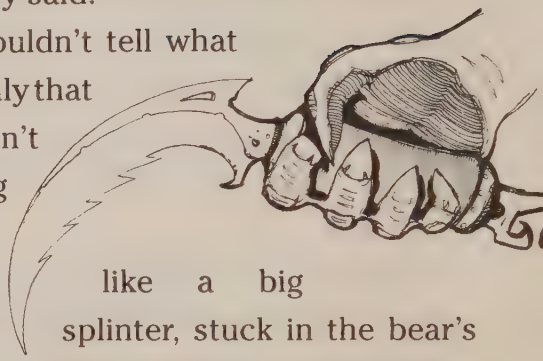
Shark Boy's hand touched on something cold, hard, and metallic, sticking out of the bear's back.

"I *knew* it,"



Shark Boy said.

He couldn't tell what it was, only that it didn't belong there. It was like a big golden splinter, stuck in the bear's back. Poor creature. Shark Boy knew how much a little wooden splinter could hurt, and he couldn't imagine how much pain a metal splinter this big could cause.



Luckily for all of them, Shark Boy had gotten splinters before—from the driftwood he used to construct his furniture in the Sharkcave—and he knew how to get them out.

His claws should do the trick. If he had the chance to use them.

The bear had given up trying to shake Shark Boy loose by spinning, and it knew that it couldn't reach him with its paws.

But it hadn't given up yet. It was trying to scrape Shark Boy off by rubbing its back against the hard cave walls.

Shark Boy had the wind knocked out of him, pounded against the unforgiving rock.

Shark Boy managed to get his hand around the end of the golden splinter sticking out. It looked as though the other end was curved, a little half-moon raised up beneath the red fur. Working carefully, even while being bashed against the hard walls of the cave, Shark Boy gently eased the splinter out, inch by inch.

The bear howled in anger and agony, but Shark Boy didn't stop. He knew that splinters hurt as bad coming out as they did going in, but that once the thing was all the way out the bear would feel much better—or at least, he *hoped* the bear would feel better.

The bear smashed Shark Boy against the wall once last time, just as the last of

the golden splinter pulled free of the bear's back. Holding the thing in his hand, Shark Boy leapt away from the bear, hitting the cave floor and rolling away as quickly as possible. He came to rest at Lava Girl's feet, and the two of them looked up as the giant bear loomed over them, howling with fury.

Shark Boy held the golden splinter in his hand. He could feel the hot breath of the bear on his face.

"He doesn't look very happy yet," Lava Girl said.

The bear roared in reply, and Shark Boy gritted his teeth. If the bear didn't cheer up pretty quickly, he and Lava Girl were in serious trouble.

Chapter Nine

The bear looked like it was about to attack them. Shark Boy and Lava Girl braced themselves, their hands in tight fists.

Then the bear caught sight of the piece of golden metal in Shark Boy's hands and paused. Its eyes opened wider, and it drew itself up on its hind legs.

"What's it doing?" Shark Boy said.

"It looks like it's *thinking*," Lava Girl answered.

For a long moment, the bear just stood there, looking down at Shark Boy and Lava Girl with a strange expression on its ursine face. Then, without warning, it turned around and lumbered back towards the underground river.

"It's . . . going!" Shark Boy said.

Just before diving back into the cold waters of the river, the bear paused and looked back. It rose up on its hind legs again and lifted one paw in the air, almost like it was giving a salute. Then it turned and dove back into the water with an enormous cannonball splash, and quickly dogpaddled away out of sight.

"It's gone," Lava Girl said with a smile. She turned and looked at the thing in Shark Boy's hands. "What is that, anyway?"

The thing had a long handle and a long, semicircular blade. It looked like a crescent moon stuck on the end of a tube.

Shark Boy took out his palmtop computer, and punched a series of keys. In moments, a picture that looked just like the golden thing in his hands appeared on the little computer screen.

"It looks like something called a 'sickle,'" Shark Boy said. "The computer says they were used by farmers back

before tractors, when crops had to be harvested by hand."

"So what was it doing stuck in the back of a giant bear?" Lava Girl said.

"Who knows?" Shark Boy answered. "All I can tell you is that it was really hammered in there." He glanced back at the underground river in the distance. The bear had disappeared from view, far beyond a bend. "But he seems happier with it out, I guess."

"He didn't eat us, at least," Lava Girl said. "That's good enough for me."

Shark Boy pointed up the passageway, to the dim light ahead.

"Well, we might as well keep going," he said. "No sign of the Imagineer yet."

"Don't worry, we'll find him," Lava Girl said. "So long as we're not eaten by mutant cave fish or mauled by giant bears along the way."

"What are the chances of *that* happening?" Shark Boy said with a smile.

He tossed the sickle away, sending it clattering back down the passageway to the river's edge, and then turned and headed towards the dim light ahead.

"Besides," Shark Boy said, "I'm sure we're past the trouble spots now. What's the worst that could happen?"

Shark Boy and Lava Girl walked out into the dim light at the end of the passageway. The walls glowed a faint green all around them.

"What's this?" Lava Girl said, pointing to the ground below their feet.

They were standing on some sort of heavy metal cabling, hundreds of strands crisscrossing all over the cave floor. A grid pattern, the cables were woven together, almost like . . .

"A net!" Shark Boy yelled, but it was too late.

With a loud noise, the net snapped up all around them, hoisting them high in the air. Shark Boy and Lava Girl were smashed

together, arms and legs intertwined.

"I'll try to burn through!" Lava Girl shouted. Her hands flamed up, and she directed a steady lava burst at the nearest part of the net.

The cables making up the net started to glow red, then white, with the heat of the lava burst. Shark Boy's face was pressed into the mesh, and he could feel his skin start to burn.

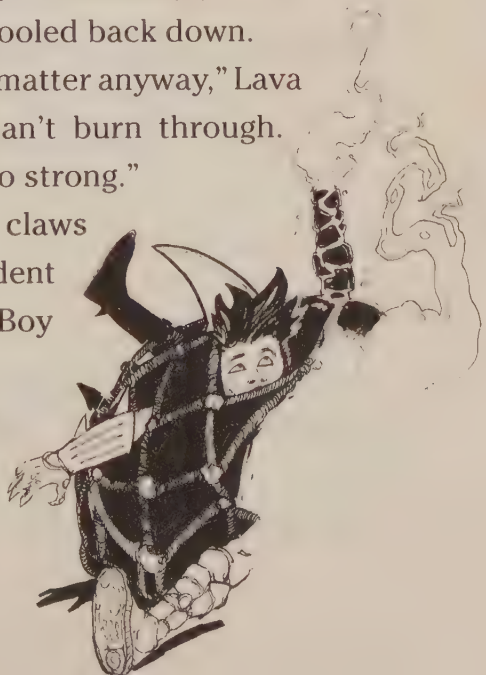
"Ouch, stop!" Shark Boy yelled.

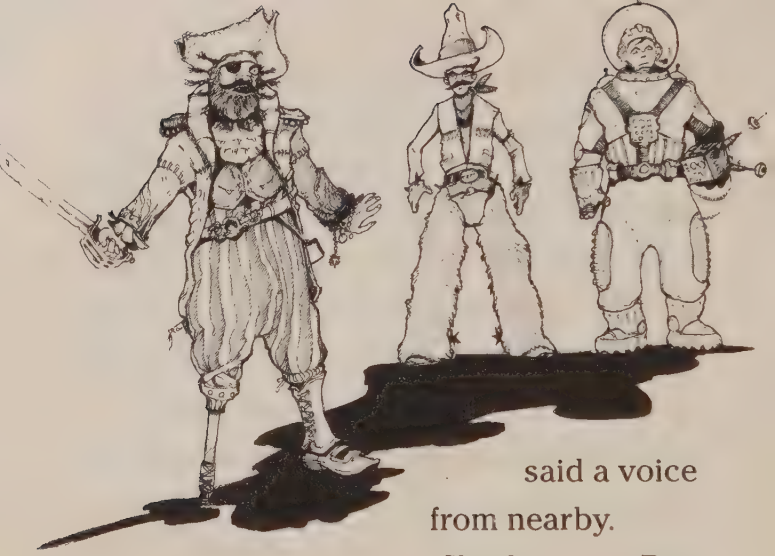
Lava Girl cooled back down.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Lava Girl said. "I can't burn through. The cable's too strong."

"And my claws can't make a dent in it," Shark Boy said.

"Arrr, me hearties. Our trap has sprung,"





said a voice from nearby.

Shark Boy managed to turn his head just enough to see through the net's mess. A man with an eye patch, a black three-cornered hat, a red brocade jacket, and one wooden leg was coming towards them, a cutlass in his hand. Two other figures followed him out of the shadows.

"I reckon you're right, pardner. But what's it caught?" The second of the three was wearing beaten-up blue jeans, a red-and-white checkered shirt, a blue

bandana tied around his neck, and a big white cowboy hat on his head.

"My analytiscope can't identify the prisoners, but one thing is certain. If they are unknown, then they are enemies." The third figure was wearing a silver spacesuit with a big glass helmet over his head. He carried a big, ungainly electronic box in his hands, covered in huge dials and switches.

"We're not your enemies," Shark Boy said as the pirate, cowboy, and spaceman drew closer.

"At least, we don't *think* we are," Lava Girl said.

"Shh, Lava Girl, you're not helping," Shark Boy said.

"Don't pay their yelping any mind, boyos," the pirate said. "You can't be trusting the word of an enemy, now can you?"

"But we're *not* your enemies!" Shark Boy said.

"Well, sir, if y'all ain't enemies, then what are you doing in that there trap?" the cowboy said. "Hmmm?"

"The cowboy has a point," the spaceman said.

It was like dealing with the blind albino piranhas all over again.

Chapter Ten

Shark Boy and Lava Girl were in shackles, marching through the cave passageways. They'd been released from the net only after their captors had a chance to bind their hands and feet together with unbreakable cuffs. Their cuffs were then attached to a long chain, with Shark Boy and Lava Girl in a train and the cowboy bringing up the rear, holding on tight to the leash.

They'd tried to convince their captors that they meant no harm, but so far they weren't having much luck.

"The enemy is tricky," the spaceman said.

"Look, we don't even know who your enemy *is*," Shark Boy said.

"That there is exactly what the enemy would say, I reckon," the cowboy said.

"Where are you taking us?" Lava Girl asked.

"Arrr, to Down Town, as if you didn't know," the pirate said.

"What's Down Town?" Shark Boy asked.

"Oh, no, you little varmint," the cowboy answered. "You won't be weaseling any secrets out of me."

"It's no use, Shark Boy," Lava Girl said.

The pirate leaned close to the spaceman.

"Hark ye, spaceman, do you mark their naming, and their manner of dress," the pirate asked. "Might they be from some lost tribe of supers, of which we know naught?"

"I had considered that possibility,

pirate," the spaceman said. "When they sprung the trap we'd laid for the Red Menace, my first thought was that they were our fellow countrymen, also out hunting for the beast. But on closer inspection, they don't have the look of citizens of Down Town."

The pirate cast an appraising gaze back at Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"No, I suppose they don't at that, more's the pity," the pirate said.

"Hey!" Lava Girl shouted. "You said Red Menace, didn't you?"

Shark Boy looked over at her, wondering what she was talking about, and figured it out almost at once.

"The red bear!" he said.

"You guys are hunting that helpless old bear, aren't you?" Lava Girl said.

The cowboy looked at them from beneath the wide brim of his hat, his eyes narrowed.

"Well now, you two seem mighty het up

about that old monster, now don't you?" the cowboy said. "Almost . . . friendly-like."

"You see," the spaceman said. "They *are* in league with our enemy."

"That bear isn't anybody's enemy," Shark Boy said. "Not anymore at least."

"He can't bite or claw," Lava Girl said. "And since we got that big golden splinter out of his back, he's not even angry anymore."

"Arr, that's as may be," the pirate said, "but still and all, the Red Menace is our sworn enemy, and we can't rest until he's scuttled and sunk down to Davy Jones' Locker. So to speak."

"If we didn't guard against the Red Menace," the spaceman said, "it would invade our homes, and take away our freedom. It would destroy our way of life."

"But it can't do anything to you now," Shark Boy said. "You're just afraid of old

dreams. I don't know if there was ever a real reason to be afraid of the Red Menace, or whatever you call it. Maybe there was. But there certainly isn't *now*."

"You need to wake up," Lava Girl said. "You're stuck in old patterns."

Their captors didn't listen.

"That's enough jawing out of you two varmints," the cowboy said, and tugged on the chain that bound them.

They walked along a narrow passage in silence.

Shark Boy brushed against the wall to their right with his shoulder, and pulled back startled, his arm scorched. The wall was hot!

Lava Girl glanced back at him, a serious expression on her face.

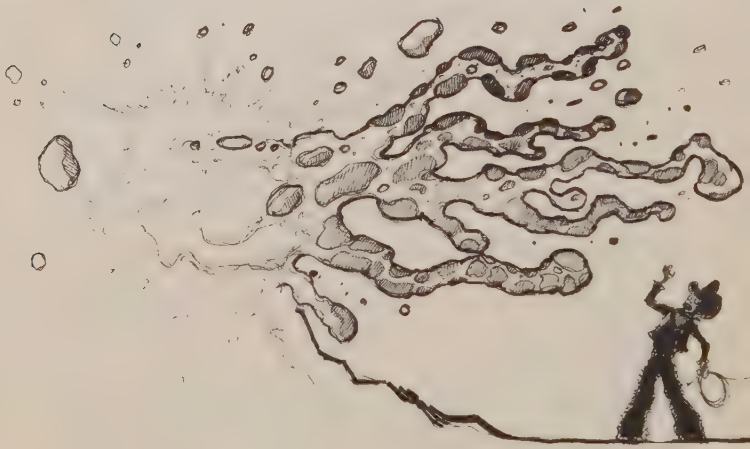
"There is lava on the other side of that wall," she said. "A *lot* of it."

Lava Girl looked at the wall again, then back to Shark Boy, her eyes wide.

"Oh, no," she said, but it was already

too late.

The wall crumbled, and a glowing-hot tidal wave of red lava surged towards them.



Chapter Eleven

Lava Girl didn't hesitate for an instant. Even though her hands were bound in handcuffs and she couldn't move more than a few feet forwards or backwards without coming to the end of the metal chain, she could still commune with the living, red-hot magma of the planet. The lava was hers to command.

Shark Boy glanced back just in time to see Lava Girl motion with her fingers.

The tidal wave of lava was headed right towards the pirate and the spaceman, who didn't have time to cry out, much less run away.

"Stop!" Lava Girl shouted, though Shark Boy suspected she could command the magma with just her thoughts if she wanted.

The tidal wave suddenly froze in midair, just inches away from the pirate and the spaceman. It was as if time suddenly stood still, the huge wall of hot lava caught in the split second before it engulfed the two men completely.

"Back," Lava Girl said, calmer this time.

Now the lava began to flow *backwards*, back into the breach in the wall. It looked like a filmstrip being run in reverse, the tidal wave shrinking back through the hole in the wall.

"Arrr, what is that slip of a girl doing, matey?" the pirate said uneasily.

"Stand down, sailor," the spaceman ordered, waving the pirate back with a quick motion of his hand. He narrowed his eyes at Lava Girl, peering at her through the clear glass of his helmet. "Let her be for the moment."

The wall was now cold black stone on either side, with a flat section of hot red

lava in the middle. Heat poured from the lava, which swirled and bubbled as though behind an invisible barrier but didn't spill forwards into the passageway. It was like standing too close to a fire, or heating vents turned up too high; not at all like being only a few feet away from a cubic ton of molten lava hot enough to burn a grown man into cinders in seconds.

"Cool down," Lava Girl said.

The red section of the wall started to go gray, then went quickly to black. The air in the passageway cooled down, like an industrial-sized air conditioner had just been turned on somewhere nearby. In a matter of eyeblinks, the wall was solid rock again, as though it had never broken at all.

Lava Girl's shoulders slumped, and she relaxed visibly. Though it had seemed easy for her, Shark Boy knew that trick had taken a lot out of her. She was barely able to stand upright, and leaned heavily on

the metal chain that bound her handcuffs to Shark Boy's. He leaned back slightly, helping to hold her upright by pulling back on his end of the chain.

"What in tarnation?" the cowboy whispered behind them, pushing his wide-brimmed hat up on his head. He stepped around Shark Boy to get a better look at the wall, and whistled low.

"See here, are you sure these two be not from the tribe of supers?" the pirate asked, his good eye narrowing. "That had all the seeming of a super's tricks."

The spaceman crossed his arms over his chest, and shook his head inside his glass helmet.

"That would be a logical conclusion, but it doesn't fit all the facts." He looked from Shark Boy to Lava Girl and back. "My instinct is to let the princess decide what to do with them, and be done with it."

The cowboy nodded eagerly.

"Yessir, I certainly do agree with that,"

he said. "The princess'll know what to do with 'em."

"Arrr, right you be," the pirate agreed. "We'll hand the scallywags over to Her Highness, and let *her* sort them out."

Shark Boy tried his bonds again for the hundredth time, but all his strength couldn't break the cuffs on his arms or legs. He looked to the spaceman, a pleading expression on his face.

"Why not just let us go?" Shark Boy said. "We're just passing through, looking for an old man, and we don't mean you any harm."

Lava Girl's eyes flickered up for a brief moment, a look of realization flitting across her face.

"Sharkie," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, drained for the moment of all energy. "Ask them . . . about the Imagineer. . . ."

If Shark Boy's hands had been free, he'd have smacked himself in the forehead. He

didn't know why they hadn't thought of it before.

"Maybe you know the man we're looking for," he said eagerly. "We're not sure what his name is, but he said he's been called the Imagineer. Have you heard of him?"

A surprised look passed back and forth between the pirate and the spaceman, a look that suggested they'd heard the name before. The cowboy, standing a few feet to Shark Boy's side, nodded, a light dawning in his eyes.

"Well, I reckon you must mean . . ." the cowboy began.

"No more discussion, prisoners," the spaceman interrupted, motioning the cowboy quiet with a quick chopping gesture. "A decision has been made. You will be turned over to the princess. She'll know what to do with you."

The pirate stepped over and gingerly touched the cave wall. The spaceman

turned and marched up the passageway. The cowboy shrugged, and tugged on the metal chain linking Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"Giddyup, you two," the cowboy said.

Lava Girl leaned against Shark Boy, and the two of them followed the spaceman through the caverns. The pirate finally turned away from the wall and cast a long glance at Lava Girl, his expression thoughtful.

After following a winding course through the caves and passageways, they came at last to an immense cavern. It was the size of several football fields stuck together, and the ceiling arched over the cave floor as high as a skyscraper. It was the biggest cavern they'd seen so far.

Dominating the cave was an immense town, almost a small city, with a large tower in the middle that reached almost to the cavern's ceiling.

"There be Down Town," the pirate

announced, sounding like someone who was happy to be home after a long journey.

"Wahoo!" the cowboy said.

"Home sweet home," said the spaceman.

Before them stood an archway over the entrance to the town. On the sign had been printed the words "WELCOME TO UNIVERSE CITY." But the words "UNIVERSE CITY" had been crossed out with black paint,

and the name "DOWN TOWN" written above them.

"All right," the spaceman said, hurrying towards the entrance. "Let's get these prisoners to the princess so I can get home and get into a fresh spacesuit."

Shark Boy and Lava Girl were dragged down into the town, not at all sure what to expect next.

Chapter Twelve

Shark Boy and Lava Girl passed underneath the archway leading into Down Town. They were led down the main street, which ran from the entrance to the central tower in the near distance. People lined the streets as they passed, eager to catch a glimpse of the prisoners as they were marched by.

It seemed that the town was divided into distinct neighborhoods. To the right of the main street all of the buildings, shops, and vehicles seemed more suited to the Old West than to a hidden underground city—that area was evidently the home of the cowboy.

To the left of the main street, all of the buildings were designed to look like waterfront docks, island castles, or even

sailing ships built on land instead of water, with men and women in pirate costume walking up and down the side streets—the home of the pirate.

Up ahead and to the right, past the Cowboy District, they could see the towering spires of rocket ships and futuristic skyscrapers, where silver-suited men and women wearing jetpacks flew overhead—the Spaceman District.

Up ahead and to the left, on the other side of the Pirate District, they saw what looked like an idealized American city, skyscrapers and tenement houses and billboards, but more like something that could be seen in a black-and-white movie than anything that could be found in a modern American city. Over the narrow streets of that district flew men and women in capes, masks, and skin-tight costumes, like characters out of a comic book—apparently they were the supers their captors had talked about.

Shark Boy knew that there must be other neighborhoods on the far side of the town, beyond the Super District and the Spaceman District. But what they might be, Shark Boy couldn't begin to guess. What sort of place was this, anyway?

Their captors brought them at last to a large public square in the shadow of the central tower. Around the edges of the square were low buildings of polished chrome, stainless steel, and marble, which Shark Boy guessed were city offices of some kind.

The city had seen better days. Everything they'd seen so far had been a bit run-down, ragged around the edges. They could tell the locals took pride in their city and tried to keep it up, but it was like an old sofa; you could dust and vacuum it every day, wash and fluff the cushions, keep it out of the sun and keep the cats from clawing at it, but in the end the sofa got old, and you couldn't do

anything to hide the worn spots in the fabric. The city was like that. Polished to a mirror sheen, but you could see the worn spots. You could see the age.

At the top of the tower was a little globe circled by three orbiting spheres. Like a model of an atom, or a sun and tiny planets—Shark Boy couldn't tell which.

Their captors led them to a kind of stage at the foot of the tower. The cowboy secured their shackles to a metal ring set in the ground, in front of a high podium, and went to stand next to the spaceman and the pirate off to one side. A crowd began to form in the square. Cowboys, pirates, spacemen, supers, even talking animals dressed in human clothes—mice, ducks, and dogs—all gathered together with their attention fixed on Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"What's going on here?" Lava Girl said, calling over to their captors.

"You are being put on trial," the

spaceman said.

"But we haven't *done* anything!" Shark Boy said.

Before their captors had a chance to answer, all eyes turned to the podium. An old woman had come out of one of the metal-and-glass buildings, and stood behind the podium. She was wearing what must once have been an expensive dress, all frills and shades of pinks and greens, with a little crown on top of her neatly coifed white hair. She must have been a beautiful princess in her youth, but like the town, you could see her age. Now, looking like the grandmother of someone's grandmother, she was an imposing figure, serious and severe.

"You are accused of being enemy agents," the princess said, her voice like nails on a chalkboard, "and if found guilty, you will be imprisoned for all eternity beneath the Tower."

Chapter Thirteen

The trial was over almost before it had begun. The princess conferred briefly with the spaceman, and then asked Shark Boy and Lava Girl just one question before passing sentence.

"Are you from Down Town?" she said.

"No," Lava Girl started to say, shaking her head, "but—"

"Silence," the princess ordered. "You, boy"—she pointed at Shark Boy—"you are not from Down Town, either, I take it?"

"Um, no, but we—" was as far as Shark Boy got.

"Then I am prepared to hand down a verdict," the princess said, cutting him off. "You are found guilty of being outlanders."

The crowd behind them, crammed into the public square, all drew breath at once, as though this was a shocking revelation.

"What is more," the princess went on, "you are found guilty of taking the side of the Red Menace against the people of Down Town."

This time, the crowd didn't bother with the shocked gasp, but started shouting instead. Apparently, they didn't like the giant red bear very much, and they didn't have much patience for its friends, either.

"I am now prepared to pass sentence," the princess said. "For these crimes—"

"Hang on!" Shark Boy shouted, struggling to try to get free, but his shackles were securely fastened to the solid ground at his feet. "Lava Girl saved your lives"—he gestured to the spaceman and the pirate with his chin—"back in that lava flood. Shouldn't that prove that

we mean the people of Down Town no harm?"

Shark Boy could tell that the princess hadn't heard that part of the story.

"Is this true?" the princess asked, turning her attention to the spaceman and the pirate. "Was there a lava flood in the caves?"

The spaceman lowered his eyes, and nodded slightly.

"Aye, Yer Highness," the pirate answered, taking off his three-cornered hat and giving a little bow. "The scallywag speaks true on that count, at least."

The princess tapped her front teeth with a fingernail, thoughtfully, looking from the three captors to the two prisoners and back again.

"You," she finally said, pointing at the spaceman. "You will provide testimony."

The spaceman glanced sheepishly at the pirate, and then approached the podium.

"What the prisoner says is correct, in essence," the spaceman said. "After they were snared in the trap we set for the Red Menace, we took them into custody and were escorting them back to Down Town. En route, a section of cave wall collapsed, releasing a tidal wave of hot magma. The female prisoner appears to have the ability to control lava, and she was able to halt the progress of the magma and restore the wall before either the pirate or myself was injured."

"So you corroborate the male prisoner's account—" the princess began to ask.

"My *name* is Shark Boy."

The princess cast an angry glance Shark Boy's way, but nodded slightly before continuing.

"So you corroborate . . . Shark Boy's . . . account that the female prisoner—"

"*Excuse* me, but it's Lava Girl, if you *don't* mind," Lava Girl said haughtily.

The princess looked over to Lava Girl and sighed.

"So you corroborate Shark Boy's account that . . . Lava Girl . . . rescued you from certain injury or even death in the wake of a lava flood?"

The spaceman nodded.

"Essentially correct, yes," he said.

The princess thought for a moment, and then nodded to the spaceman. "Thank you," she said. "You may step down."

While the spaceman went back to stand next to the pirate, the princess turned her attention to Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"This is a difficult question, indeed," she said, tapping her front teeth with a fingernail again, her brows knitted. "On the one hand, you have saved the lives of citizens of Down Town, for which you deserve our gratitude. On the other hand, you side with the Red Menace, and if you are not with the people of Down Town,

you are against us." The princess laced her fingers together and rocked back and forth on her heels. "Yes, a very difficult question."

"Well," Lava Girl said, trying to be helpful, "you could always just let us go."

The princess shook her head angrily.

"That won't do," she said. "That won't do at all. No, the punishment for being enemy agents is very clear—life imprisonment. However, circumstances mitigate in your favor. It looks like you will have to appeal your case to a higher authority."

The princess snapped her fingers, and the cowboy and pirate stepped forwards and took hold of Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"What's happening now?" Shark Boy asked, struggling unsuccessfully to free himself.

"You will be taken to see the Maker," the princess said, pointing to the Tower

looming over them. "*He* will decide your fate."

Chapter Fourteen

"Who's this 'Maker' you're taking us to see, anyway?" Shark Boy asked as he and Lava Girl were escorted to the Tower.

"Did he create your city?" Lava Girl asked.

"He is not *our* Maker," the spaceman said, glancing back over his shoulder at them. The cowboy tugged on the chain that connected them, dragging them up the steps to the main door of the Tower. "He is the Maker Who Stayed Behind. He was here before us, and came to live among us once our own Maker passed beyond the veil."

Lava Girl looked at Shark Boy, smirking.

"Did that make any sense to you?" she

said.

"No, not really," Shark Boy answered with a grim smile.

Lava Girl shrugged and said, "Me, neither."

The pirate looked at Lava Girl and Shark Boy as though they'd suddenly sprouted horns from the tops of their heads, his eyes wide.

"Can it be that you scallywags really have no knowledge of the workings of the Makers?" he said, eyebrow arched over his eye patch. "Them what dream the world into being, and play the tune all dreamers'll dance to?"

Lava Girl glanced over at Shark Boy.

"Do you suppose he means the Day Dreamers, Shark Boy?"

The pirate's eyes lit up.

"Aye, that I do, missy," he said. "I knew you'd have dealt with them, whatever flag they fly under, Maker or Day Dreamer or whatever else. No one in the Realm

of Dreams can escape knowing about *them*."

Shark Boy nodded slowly, realization dawning.

"Okay, I think I understand now, Lava," he said, whispering over his shoulder to Lava Girl. "This Maker they talk about must be a Day Dreamer from a long time ago, who stuck around down here after his time ended."

"And these people are dreams left behind by *another* Day Dreamer, I guess," Lava Girl answered.

Shark Boy and Lava Girl had met a Day Dreamer before. A Day Dreamer was the dream-self of a person in the Waking World with a powerful imagination, and there was one for every generation. The Realm of Dreams was given shape and form by the Day Dreamer, whose imagination dictated what sorts of dreams the rest of the Waking World had when they slept. The current Day Dreamer was

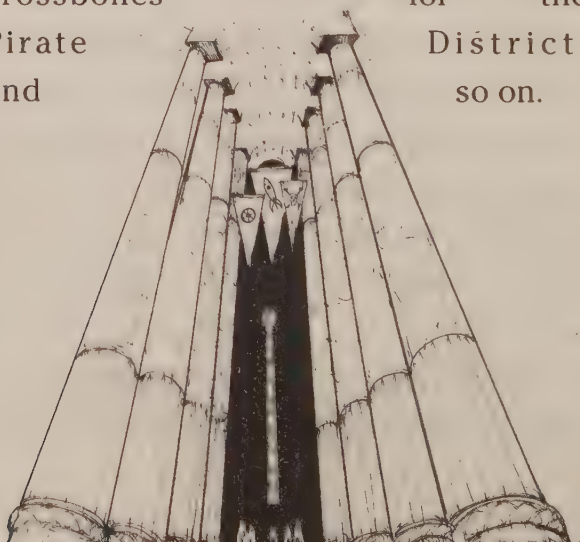
a boy named Max, who had helped Shark Boy and Lava Girl during the time of the Darkness, when a bully's dream-self and a rogue dream almost managed to eradicate everything in the Realm of Dreams so that they could rebuild it in their own image. Thanks to the Day Dreamer, Planet Drool was saved, and Shark Boy and Lava Girl were able to return to their lives.

"Old dreams," Shark Boy said, looking at their captors, then glancing back at the townsfolk still milling around in the public square. "But why are they underground? And what is this town?"

"Do you think we can trust this old Day Dreamer?" Lava Girl said, leaning close to Shark Boy as they passed through the main doors of the Tower. "If it was Max, I know that he'd let us go, but who's to say that an old Day Dreamer has to be a good guy?"

"Some dreams *are* nightmares," Shark Boy agreed.

They entered a large atrium. The floors were polished marble, worn down by thousands of footsteps over the years. Archways led to rooms and hallways going off in all directions, and two spiral staircases ran in a double helix up the walls, disappearing from view beyond the high ceiling. From the ceiling hung banners, one for each of the town's districts—a wagon wheel on a field of brown for the Cowboy District, a silver spaceship against a field of black for the Spaceman District, a skull-and-crossbones for the Pirate District, and so on.



Shark Boy and Lava Girl didn't have much time to admire the architecture. Their captors dragged them across the floor to a small, unimposing door in a far corner. The spaceman opened the door, and went through.

"In there, you varmints," the cowboy said, standing by the open door and ushering them in.

Beyond the door was a set of stairs leading down into darkness. Shark Boy went first, his eyes adjusting quickly.

"It's okay," he whispered to Lava Girl over his shoulder. "It looks like some kind of jail down there, with big metal cages."

"Holding cells?" Lava Girl whispered back as they carefully made their way down the stairs.

"Maybe," Shark Boy said. "Or even a zoo, I guess."

Down below, the spaceman reached the bottom and turned on a bank of bright lights. Shark Boy had to squint

momentarily against the glare, but his eyes adjusted after a few seconds.

"In you go, scallywags," the pirate said, opening the door to the smallest of the big metal cages. There were a half dozen of them or more, of varying sizes. Shark Boy shuddered to think what kind of creature might be big enough to require the largest of them.

Shark Boy and Lava Girl trudged into the cell, and the pirate shot and locked the door behind them with a loud clatter. The cowboy reached through the bars and removed the shackles around their wrists and ankles, and handed them to the spaceman.

"Hey," Shark Boy said, as the pirate, spaceman, and cowboy turned and walked back to the stairs. "I thought we were going to see this Maker guy."

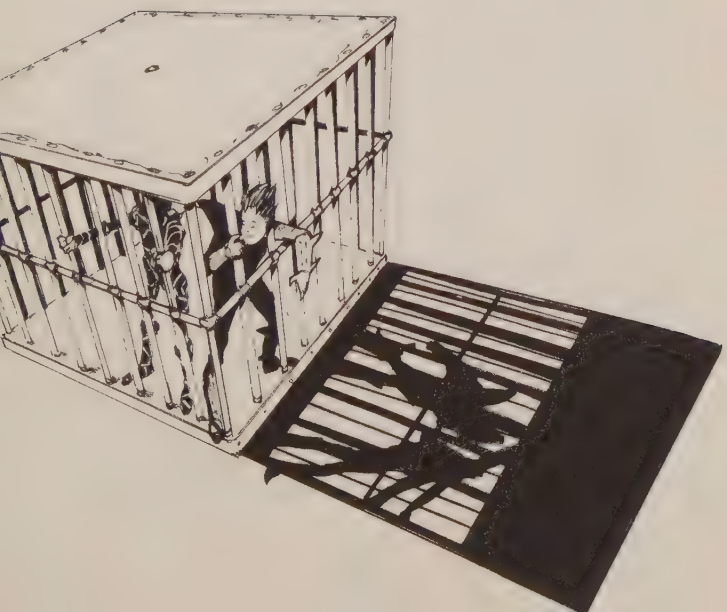
"You can't just leave us down here," Lava Girl protested.

The spaceman paused at the foot of

the steps, his hand on the light switch.

"You will be brought before the Maker when his schedule allows. For now, you will wait here, quietly."

The spaceman switched off the lights, and Shark Boy and Lava Girl were left in darkness.



Chapter Fifteen

They tried to escape, but it was no use. Lava Girl even tried to whip Shark Boy up in to a Frenzy, but he wasn't able to break through. The bars of the cage were even stronger than the ones in the Dungeon. They must have been made of the same stuff as the net and shackles that their captors had used.

"Whoever dreamed these bars into being really knew what they were doing," Lava Girl said. "I've can't even scorch the things, much less melt through."

"Tell me about it," Shark Boy said, holding his jaw. "My aching teeth. Remind me not to try to bite through unbreakable bars again anytime soon, okay?"

The room was still dark, and Lava Girl couldn't see very far. When she brightened

up, though, she was too hot for Shark Boy. So he sat in the far corner every so often so she could brighten up just enough to see the room, because if she didn't she'd start to get a little frightened. Shark Boy couldn't blame her. Locked in the darkness, unable to escape, not knowing what was going to happen next? He could see in the dark, but he was getting a little frightened himself.

Aside from the half dozen or so big metal cages, there wasn't much of anything to see in the room. The banks of lights overhead, now dimmed. The stairs, leading up to the atrium. A set of enormous sliding metal doors along one wall, and a smaller set along another.

"I think that's an elevator," Shark Boy said, pointing out the small set of sliding doors when Lava Girl had the room momentarily brightened.

"Where do you think it goes?" Lava Girl asked, dimming her light as she did.

"Who knows?" Shark Boy said with a shrug. "But it's got to be better than this."

They waited in the darkness for what seemed like an eternity.

Shark Boy suddenly sat up straight, his ear cocked.

"Something's coming," he whispered.

Lava Girl jumped to her feet and looked around.

"I don't hear anything," she said.

Shark Boy just raised his hand, motioning her to wait. He listened for a long moment, and then pointed in the direction of the enormous sliding metal doors.

Finally, the stillness was interrupted by violent noise. A sound of clattering and loud angry thumps came from the other side of the large doors.

"I heard *that*," Lava Girl said.

Then, they could hear a familiar bellowing roar.

"The bear!" Shark Boy said.

The enormous doors slid back with the tortured sound of metal grinding on metal, and a group of cowboys and pirates scrambled in, holding tight to chains wrapped around a giant red-furred bear.

"It *is* the bear," Lava Girl said, as one of the pirates flicked on the overhead bank of lights.

The bear's front paws were cuffed with giant versions of the same shackles that Shark Boy and Lava Girl had worn, with a similar set binding his hind legs together.

The small sliding doors on the far wall opened with a little "ping" noise, and the

spaceman and one of the supers walked through. Shark Boy could see an elevator car beyond.

"We caught the big galoot," one of the cowboys hollered, waving to the spaceman and the super. "We caught that dang-ole Red Menace!"

The bear roared again in its defiance, and one of the pirates poked it hard with his cutlass.

"Avast, ye scurvy dog," the pirate shouted. "Mind your manners, or it's the plank for ye."

"Hey!" Lava Girl shouted, flaring bright. "Don't do that!"

"He can't hurt you," Shark Boy yelled, rattling the cage doors. "He can't hurt anybody."

The bear lifted its muzzle in the air when it heard their voices, its yellow eyes scanning the room. It saw them in the cage and made a plaintive whining noise.

"Hush up, you two," one of the cowboys

said to Shark Boy and Lava Girl, rattling the bars of their cage. "If you don't keep quiet, you just might get yourselves a whooping."

The bear's yellow eyes opened wide, and it let out a tremendous roar.

"Uh-oh," Shark Boy said, backing away from the cage door.

The bear was enraged. It rose up on its hind legs, front paws straining against their shackles.

"Watch it, boyos," one of the pirates yelled. "It's trying to make a break for it."

The cowboys and pirates were dragged back and forth as the giant bear thrashed from side to side, tugging at the chains binding him.

"Be careful, citizens," yelled the super near the elevator, raising a gloved hand in warning. "If my X-ray vision doesn't deceive me, it looks like those cuffs are about to—"

The super didn't get to finish his

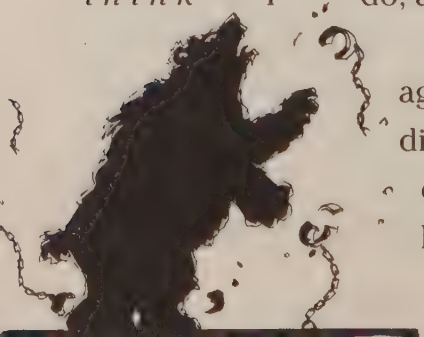
sentence, but in a split second everyone knew what he'd been about to say.

With a loud cracking noise, the bear split the shackles on its paws in half. Then, with its paws free, it made short work of the bonds on its hind legs.

"Hold 'em, pardners!" one of the cowboys yelled, trying to pull back on the chain around the bear's midsection, but it was no use. Once the bear had its front and back legs free, it was able to rip free from the chains.

"Um, Sharkie?" Lava Girl said uncertainly, as the now freed bear turned its attention to them.

"I think I know what it's doing," Shark Boy answered, his voice wavering. "I *think* I do, anyway."



The bear roared again and lumbered directly towards the cage holding Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

It stopped right in front, rose up to its full height, and then smashed into the cage door with all its weight behind the blow.

The cage door, which had stood up to Shark Boy's strength and Lava Girl's heat, crumpled like an old tin can under the bear's full weight.

"Wow," Shark Boy said.

He and Lava Girl stood at the open door to their cage, looking up at the giant bear. It sat back on its haunches and raised a front paw in salute, just like it had done at the river's edge. Then, it launched back into the cowboys and pirates who gathered around nervously, trying to recapture it.

"Come on," Lava Girl said, grabbing Shark Boy's arm.

In the confusion, Shark Boy and Lava Girl ran directly towards the elevator, breezing past the spaceman and the super. Before either of the two men could grab them, they jumped into the elevator

car, just as the doors slammed shut. There was a slight "ping" noise, and then the elevator started to climb.

Chapter Sixteen

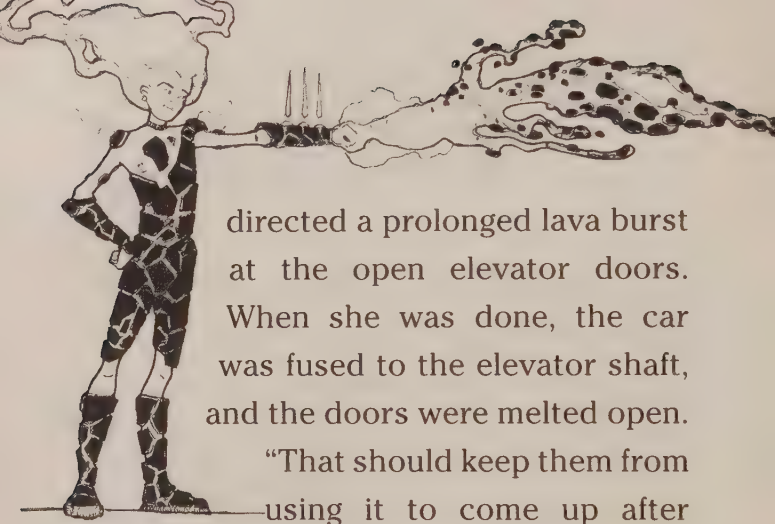
Shark Boy and Lava Girl walked out the elevator doors, squinting against the bright light streaming through the windows. The elevator was housed in a kind of cylindrical pillar that stood at the center of a big, donut-shaped room. There was no furniture, just polished marble floors and tall windows, and no one in sight.

Shark Boy took a few steps across the floor, tensed and ready for action.

"Looks like the coast is clear," he called over his shoulder to Lava Girl.

"Good," Lava Girl said. "In that case, you might want to get some distance. I'm going to take care of the elevator."

Shark Boy walked to a safe distance, and watched through his fingers as Lava Girl



directed a prolonged lava burst at the open elevator doors. When she was done, the car was fused to the elevator shaft, and the doors were melted open.

"That should keep them from using it to come up after us," Lava Girl said, her light slowly dimming as she cooled down to a normal temperature.

"It looks like this room occupies an entire floor of the Tower," Shark Boy called over to Lava Girl. "There's windows all the way around, looking out over the city."

"We must be pretty high up for the Tower walls to be so close together," Lava Girl said, coming to stand beside him.

They looked out the nearest windows.

"Yep," Shark Boy said, then whistled

low. "We're pretty far up all right."

From this vantage point, they could see that they were at the pinnacle of the Tower. The big sculpture—whether a model of an atom or of moons orbiting a planet, they still couldn't say—was just a short distance above them, the ceiling of the enormous cavern only a little bit farther up. The ground was a long, long way down.

Looking down, they could see all of Down Town spread out before them. From that high up, it was clear that the town was laid out in a wide circle, divided into six distinct neighborhoods. A river ran around the perimeter of the city, where

riveted-steel submarines and pirate ships with tall masts leisurely drifted.

"This must be some sort of observation level," Lava Girl said, looking around the room. "That would explain why there's a bunch of windows but no furniture."

"Well," Shark Boy said, "we'll have to make it to the base of the tower before we can escape. There's no way to go down the outside."

"And we can't use the elevator, naturally." Lava Girl gestured to the melted wreck in the central pillar.

Shark Boy started pacing, trying to figure a way out.

"Look," Shark Boy said, pointing to the central pillar. From where he stood, he could see to the far side, opposite the elevator. There, set in the curve of the wall, was a door.

"Delightful," Lava Girl said, opening the door and looking inside. Beyond, there was a metal staircase, spiraling up

and down.

"There's no point in going up," Shark Boy said. "We're already too high up for my tastes."

"Down it is, then," Lava Girl said.

The staircase ended at the next floor down. They cautiously walked through the doorway and found themselves in a wide hallway. The floor sloped gently down and to the right, with windows along the left-hand side, and a gently curving wall along the right, with doors set every few yards along it.

"The floor must spiral all the way down to the main atrium," Lava Girl said. "If we follow the hallway, it should take us to the bottom."

"We'll have to be careful, and hope we don't run into anyone on our way down," Shark Boy said.

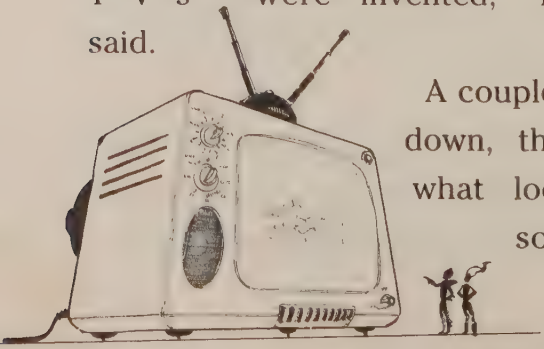
Shark Boy and Lava Girl followed the spiraling hallway, down and down. For the first few minutes, they didn't encounter

anyone at all, nor any sign that anyone had been that way in a while. Like the city below, it was apparent that the Tower had seen better days. Kept well-scrubbed and clean, everything still looked worn down and aged.

On one level, they came upon a giant television, as large as a house. The picture on the screen, though, of cowboys and Indians riding across a western desert, was in black and white, and the sound from the speakers sounded tiny and small.

"Why go to the trouble of making such a big TV screen and not make it in color?" Shark Boy asked.

"Maybe it was made before color TVs were invented," Lava Girl said.



A couple of levels down, they found what looked like some sort

of restaurant, with black-and-white checkered tiles on the floor, red vinyl booths highlighted in gleaming chrome, and a soda fountain behind a curved counter. In a glass display case along one side were dozens and dozens of tubs of ice cream, but in only three flavors—chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. In the corner stood an enormous jukebox, all neon lights and bubbling water in colored tubes, playing nothing but golden oldies.

"Weird," Shark Boy said.

"No kidding," Lava Girl said. "Time-warp city."

They continued down the curving hallways. A few levels below the diner they found a big room with a massive throne set up on a central pedestal. Shark Boy found it strangely familiar.

"I've seen something like this before," Shark Boy said.

"The Dream Lair!" Lava Girl said, snapping her fingers and sending up a

little puff of smoke.

"That's it!" Shark Boy said. "This looks just like Max's throne room in the Dream Lair."

Lava Girl nodded.

"Then the Tower must have been the Dream Lair of a Day Dreamer back in olden days," she said.

"That's why everything is antique," Shark Boy said. "Black-and-white televisions, only three kinds of ice cream, the moldy-oldies jukebox. Everything here is like it would have been in the old Day Dreamer's time."

Lava Girl looked around the throne room.

"It's kind of interesting, isn't it?" she said. "Kind of like a museum of dreams."

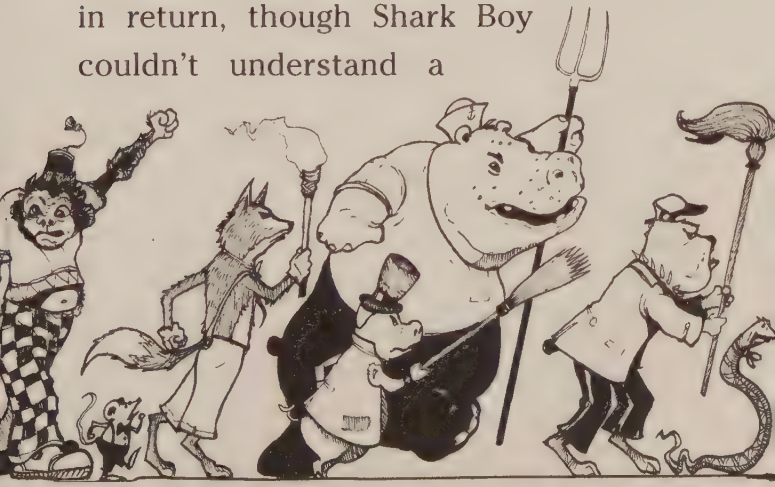
Shark Boy suddenly looked nervously back the way they'd come.

"Well, our tour is about to be cut short, I think," he said, pointing back up the spiraling hallway.

Coming around the bend were more than a dozen animals carrying pitchforks and torches, like frightened villagers in an old monster movie. The animals—mice, ducks, dogs, even lions—were all wearing bits and pieces of human clothing. Some had on nothing but bow ties, while others wore top hats and tuxedos, or a shirt and tie with no pants, or just pants and suspenders, but almost all of them were wearing dainty little white gloves.

"There they are!" one of the mice yelled, in a high squeaky voice.

One of the ducks quacked something in return, though Shark Boy couldn't understand a



word he said.

"Catch the intruders!" one of the dogs barked, waving a torch overhead like an enormous sparkler.

As one, the animals charged Shark Boy and Lava Girl, shouting furiously.

Chapter Seventeen

Shark Boy and Lava Girl sprang into action.

Lava Girl heated up and rained a curtain of hot lava down between her and the approaching animals.

'Lava! Go ahead down the hallways. I've got an idea," Shark Boy called to Lava Girl.

Shark Boy used his claws and strength to rip the heavy throne out of the floor.

Lava Girl sprinted past Shark Boy, looking back over her shoulder and using all her concentration to maintain the curtain of hot lava that was keeping the animals at bay.

Shark Boy lifted the heavy throne on his shoulder, straining with the effort, and struggled under its weight as he

followed Lava Girl. When he reached the narrowest point of the hallway, he walked backwards a few feet down the hall and then wedged the large throne between the walls. There were still gaps at the top and bottom where the smallest of the animals could squeeze through, but the obstacle would slow them down a little.

Shark Boy turned and raced after Lava Girl down the hallway.

"Did we lose them?" Lava Girl asked, panting.

"For the moment," Shark Boy said. "But they'll catch up. It's only a matter of time."

They passed level after level, each packed with wonders from a forgotten age. Like Lava Girl had said, it was almost a museum of dreams. But they didn't have time to slow down and appreciate things. They had to reach the ground level and get out of the tower.

They turned a bend in the hallway and

almost ran smack into a man and woman in costumes. As it was, Shark Boy tumbled into Lava Girl, and both fell to the floor.

"Whoa there, citizen," the man said, helping Shark Boy to his feet. "I know that there's some kind of excitement downstairs, but that's no excuse for running without looking where you're going."

The man was wearing a brown and tan costume, complete with mask, and cat ears on his head. On his chest was a stylized cat-head image. The woman helping Lava Girl to her feet was wearing a similar costume. Both had utility belts around their waists, complete with cat-head belt buckles.

"Say, Kitten, I thought I recognized these supers," the man said, rubbing his chin and glancing over at the woman, "but on further reflection, I don't believe I've ever seen them before. Have you?"

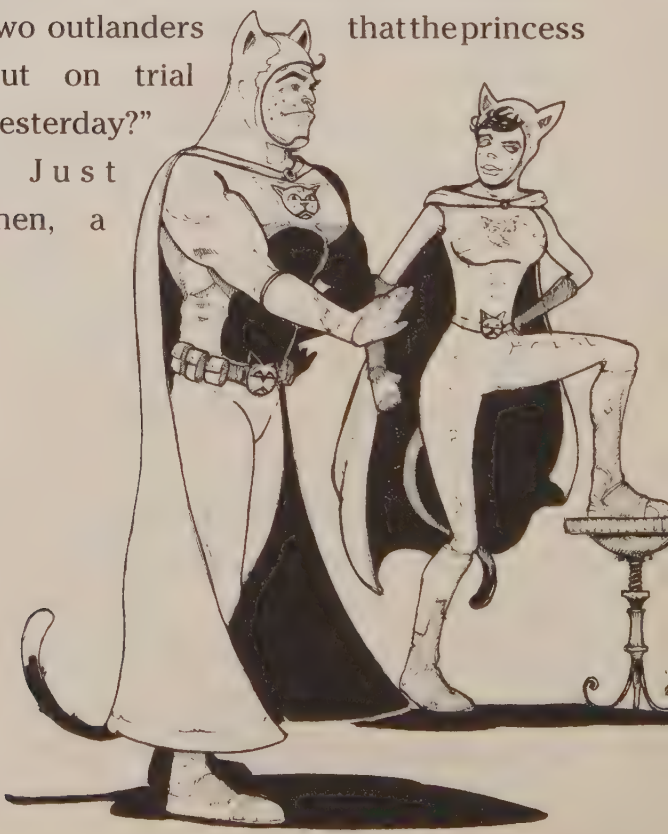
The woman shook her head.

"No, Catman, I can't say that I have," she said.

Shark Boy and Lava Girl started edging away, trying casually to get around the two supers in the narrow hallway.

"Say," the man said, eyes narrowing behind his cat- mask. "Aren't they the two outlanders that the princess put on trial yesterday?"

Just then, a



contingent of talking animals rounded the corner.

"Catman! Kitten! Don't let the prisoners escape!" squeaked a squirrel in overalls, waving white-gloved hands.

"Run!" Shark Boy yelled, already sprinting down the hallway away from the supers and the pursuing animals.

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Lava Girl shouted, catching up to him in a heartbeat.

Luckily, it took the two supers a moment to respond, and so Shark Boy and Lava Girl were able to put some distance between themselves and their pursuers. But they could hear the pounding footsteps of Catman, Kitten, and the talking animals following close behind them, hot on their heels.

"We've got to find someplace to hide," Lava Girl panted, out of breath.

"I know," Shark Boy said, wheezing. "I don't think I can keep up this pace. How

tall *is* this tower, anyway?"

Lava Girl pointed up ahead, to an unassuming doorway set in the wall to their right.

"Let's try one of these rooms," she said. "Maybe they'll run past without checking, and we can backtrack once they're gone."

Shark Boy nodded, and raced to the door.

"There must be another elevator or *something* around here we could use," he said, prying open the door. "My legs are *killing* me."

Shark Boy and Lava Girl ducked through the door, and closed it behind them as the approaching footsteps grew louder. They crouched by the closed door in the low light, and listened as the sounds of the pursuing supers and talking animals got closer, closer . . . and then passed by, becoming more and more faint as they continued down the hallway.

"Okay," Lava Girl said with a sigh of relief. "So we just wait here a few minutes and then head back up. One of the doors we passed before might have led to another stairwell or elevator or something."

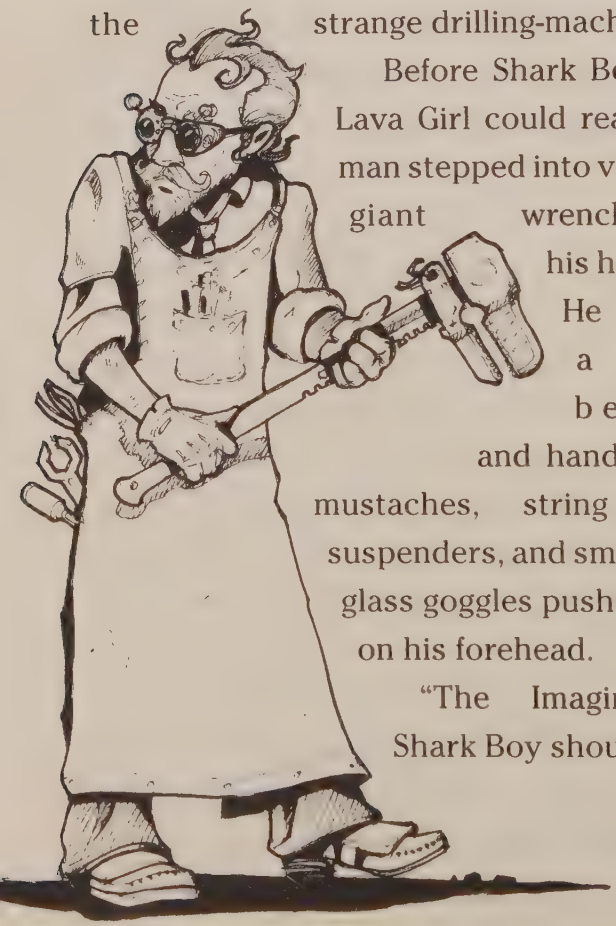
Shark Boy nodded distractedly. His attention was on the room behind them. It was a large laboratory of some kind, almost the size of the throne room upstairs, filled with all manner of machinery and equipment. He could hear the sound of banging from somewhere deep inside the laboratory, from behind some kind of strange contraption the size of the Sharksub, with tank-treads along the bottom and a giant drill bit on front.

"Look!" Lava Girl said in a whisper, pointing to the far corner of the room.

Shark Boy followed her gaze, and saw a big, steam-powered mechanical man made of brass and rivets propped in a far corner. In place of a head, it had a dome of clear glass, covering a cockpit filled

with levers and knobs. He recognized it immediately.

"Is someone there?" came a loud, blustery voice from the other side of the strange drilling-machine.



Before Shark Boy or Lava Girl could react, a man stepped into view, a giant wrench in his hands. He had a little beard and handlebar mustaches, string tie, suspenders, and smoked-glass goggles pushed up on his forehead.

"The Imagineer!" Shark Boy shouted.

Chapter Eighteen

He seemed so much smaller since he wasn't riding in a twenty-foot tall brass machine, but he still towered over Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"What are *you* two doing here?" the Imagineer asked.

"We're escaping," Lava Girl said, sounding confused. "What are *you* doing here?"

The Imagineer glanced back at the machine with the giant drill bit on the front.

"Well, I'm trying to finish construction on a vessel capable of traversing the lower depths unencumbered, but I don't know what that has to do with anything," the Imagineer said.

"To escape from Down Town?" Lava

Girl asked, looking over at the machine.

"I suppose it *could* be used for that purpose," the Imagineer answered, rubbing his chin. "The drilling implement could certainly chew through the bedrock upon which the city is built. But 'escape'? An interesting choice of words, I must say. One that suggests . . ."

"He must be a prisoner here, like us!" Shark Boy shouted, interrupting.

Lava Girl looked over at Shark Boy, only half convinced.

"I guess it's *possible*," she said.

"See here, now," the Imagineer said. "You two listen to me . . ."

Shark Boy and Lava Girl never learned what the Imagineer was about to say, because at that moment they heard footsteps pounding up the hallway and stopping right outside the door.

"They've found us," Shark Boy said.

"Don't worry, sir," Lava Girl said, her heat starting to rise. "We won't let them

get at you."

"We're taking you with us when we bust out of here," Shark Boy said, baring his pointed teeth.

"But—" the Imagineer began.

The door burst open, and in swarmed a strange assortment of pursuers—supers, pirates, spacemen, cowboys, fairytale princes, talking animals—all of them intent on capturing Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"You'll never capture us!" Lava Girl said, forming balls of hot lava in either palm, ready to throw them.

"We're ready for you this time!" Shark Boy yelled, using his claws to tear up a section of metal flooring, getting ready to throw it like a Frisbee at their pursuers.

"Come on, y'all!" one of the cowboys yelled, twirling a lasso over his head. "Let's get 'em!"

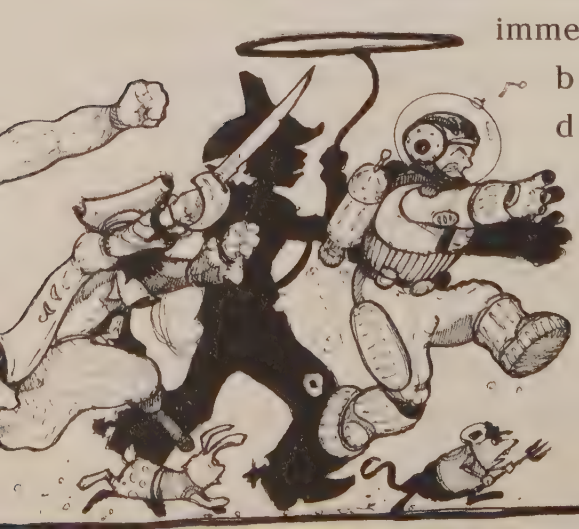
"Arr," shouted one of the pirates. "Keelhaul the scallywags."

"Surrender, miscreants," said one of the supers, a cape fluttering from his broad shoulders, "or face the consequences."

Shark Boy was about to yell back his defiance and throw the section of flooring into the midst of their pursuers when he heard a deafening clatter of metal on metal from behind him.

"Cease this infernal noise!" shouted the Imagineer, banging his heavy wrench against the front of the drilling machine. "I'll not stand it in my laboratory a moment longer."

To Shark Boy's surprise, the pursuers immediately backed down,



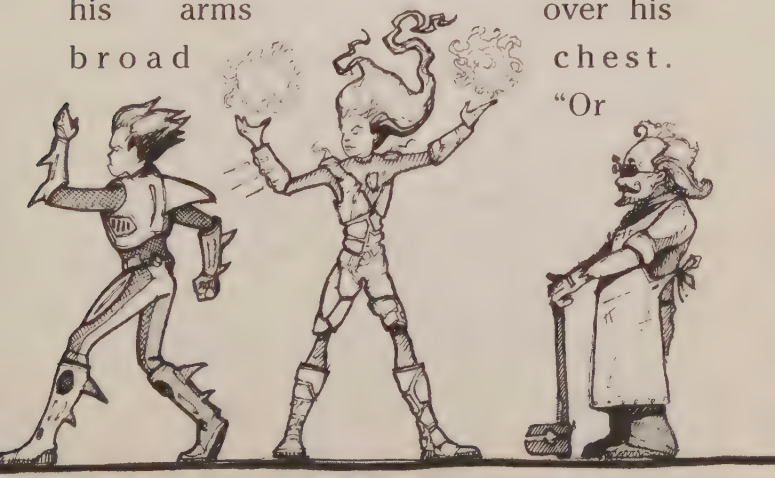
lowering their eyes to the floor with sheepish expressions on their faces.

"You should all be ashamed of yourselves, making such a ruckus," the Imagineer went on.

"We're sorry," one of the supers said in a quiet voice.

"Yes sir, we surely didn't mean any harm," one of the cowboys said, pulling off his hat and running his hands through his hair.

"You lot will have to go and play your little chasing games elsewhere in the Tower," the Imagineer said, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Or



better yet, out in the streets where roughhousing belongs."

The pursuers turned towards the door, and meekly shuffled out into the hall. The spaceman who'd captured Shark Boy and Lava Girl out in the caverns paused at the door.

"What about them?" he said, pointing at Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"Never you mind about them," the Imagineer said. "We have things to discuss, I suspect."

The spaceman nodded his head inside his glass helmet, and turned to walk out into the hallway.

"And shut the door behind you, if you please," the Imagineer called after him.

When the door closed, and the three of them were left alone, Shark Boy and Lava Girl turned to the Imagineer, realization dawning in their eyes.

"It's *you*," Shark Boy said, pointing at the Imagineer. "Isn't it?"

"I might agree," the Imagineer said with a bemused smile, "if I had any notion what you were talking about."

"You're this 'Maker' they all talk about, aren't you?" Lava Girl said.

"Oh, that," the Imagineer said, nodding. "Yes, I suppose I must be."

"So that means that you were . . ." Shark Boy began. "I mean, that before Max you were . . . That is . . ."

"Yes," the Imagineer said with a sigh. "Before I died, *I* was the Day Dreamer."

Chapter Nineteen

"It wasn't called Planet Drool in those days, of course," the Imagineer said, pulling up a chair. Shark Boy and Lava Girl sat on the ground at his feet, a million questions buzzing in their heads.

"When I was a boy, the Realm of Dreams was known as the Land of Nod. As a boy, I dreamed about metal boats that could sail beneath the waves, and cannons big enough to fire men to the moon. About giant ships that could fly through the air, and machines for traveling through time."

Shark Boy looked at the machines and equipment scattered around the laboratory. Like the steam-powered mechanical man of brass, they all looked like they came from an earlier age.

"When I grew older," the Imagineer went on, "I began to write my dreams down. Books, stories, plays. The whole world read the things that I wrote, in a hundred different languages, and my dreams became the dreams of all mankind."

"Um," Lava Girl said, raising her hand to ask a question. "Did I hear you right when you said that you . . . well . . . that you *died*?"

The Imagineer smiled, a faraway look in his eyes.

"Yes, after a good span of years, it came time for my waking-self to shuffle off the mortal coil, and to go wherever it is that waking-selves go when their hour on the stage is done. But I, the dream-self—that is to say, the Day Dreamer—wanted to stay on. I had so many things left to invent, so many places left to explore, so many ideas still to make reality. So, I stayed behind."

The Imagineer paused, and looked at the shocked expressions on their faces.

"Oh, don't be so surprised," he said, chuckling. "I told you before, when people of singular will or imagination pass beyond the veil, their dream-selves can sometimes continue to exist here in the Realm of Dreams. I wasn't the first, and I sincerely doubt that I will be the last."

Shark Boy looked at Lava Girl, suppressing a shiver. What would it be like, to go on existing, knowing that a part of you had died, somewhere else?

"In time," the Imagineer continued, "the Realm of Dreams grew beyond me. Each generation dreams upon the foundation laid by all the generations that preceded it, so the new dreams were laid down on top of mine. The dreams of my era were buried under new, shinier dreams of transatlantic flights, supersonic jets, telephones and televisions and men walking on the moon. But the old dreams

were still there, down beneath, and nightmares too."

The Imagineer crossed his arms over his chest and paused thoughtfully for a moment.

"Other Day Dreamers followed me, of course, as surely as night followed day. One of them dreamt into existence a whole new land—a whole world, in fact—of which Universe City is the only part that remains. But where I had spread my dreams through stories and books, this later Day Dreamer spread his vision through films, television, and comic books. When the creator of Universe City passed on, his dream-self went with him, his work complete. But the City, so well dreamt, so well constructed, stayed behind."

Shark Boy glanced at the door, thinking of the inhabitants of Down Town, the products of another time.

"In time, they invited me to come

and live among them," the Imagineer said. "They needed me to keep their machinery in working order, and to dream into existence the things they needed to survive down in the darkness, surrounded by ancient fears and lingering nightmares."

The Imagineer climbed out of his chair, and started to pace around the laboratory floor, touching each of his machines in turn, one after another.

"Universe City became Down Town, over the years, buried under the layers of dreams of those generations who followed. And when my name was forgotten, I came to be known as the Maker Who Stayed Behind. As the Imagineer."

The Imagineer stopped, and turned to face Shark Boy and Lava Girl.

"But I know you did not come to Down Town and the world below to hear my boring tale. Why, then, did you come?"

Lava Girl looked over at Shark Boy,

and he climbed to his feet nervously.

"Well, sir," Shark Boy began uneasily, "I remembered what you said about my father, back on the edge of the Mind Field."

"And you came to see whether I have any more information to share," the Imagineer said. He was stating a fact, not asking a question, but Shark Boy nodded anyway.

"Sadly, my boy, I have told you nearly all that I know. The only thing I might add is that there is every indication that in recent years a man from the Waking World came bodily into the Realm of Dreams and traveled down below, among the forgotten dreams. For all I know he might be here still. Given the time frame involved, there is every possibility that this man might be your lost father."

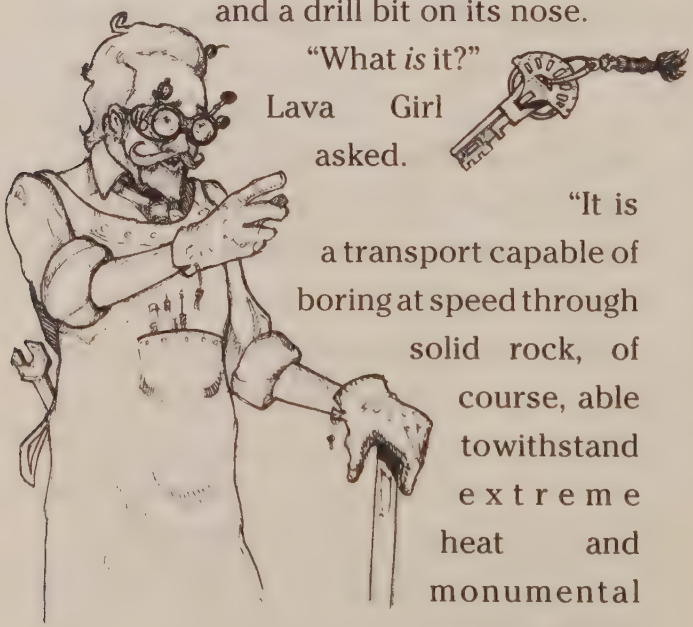
Shark Boy's breath caught in his throat.

"I . . . I have to go look for him," he

said, standing straighter.

"Well," the Imagineer said, smiling slightly, "if you are to continue your search, you may as well do so in comfort and speed."

He pointed to the digging machine he'd been working on, a large vehicle of some sort with tank-treads on the bottom and a drill bit on its nose.



"What *is* it?" Lava Girl asked.

"It is a transport capable of boring at speed through solid rock, of course, able towithstand extreme heat and monumental pressure. I had originally intended to call it either

the SpelunCar, or the MoleMobile," the Imagineer said proudly, "but I've thought better of those choices, and decided instead to call it the Under-Rider."

The Imagineer pulled a large brass key from his pocket, and tossed it through the air to Shark Boy, who caught it neatly in one hand.

"Consider it a gift, my young friends," he said with a broad smile. "And may I wish you a pleasant journey."

Chapter Twenty

Shark Boy and Lava Girl were about to disembark. The Under-Rider had been moved to the edge of Down Town, across from the river, near the cavern wall.

"Good-bye," Lava Girl said, waving to the Imagineer, who stood in the middle of a crown of Down Townsfolk. She climbed through the metal hatch, disappearing into the cockpit.

"Thanks, again!" Shark Boy shouted, climbing the rungs to the hatchway.

From one side of the crowd came a familiar bellowing roar. But for the first time, it sounded happy, not enraged.

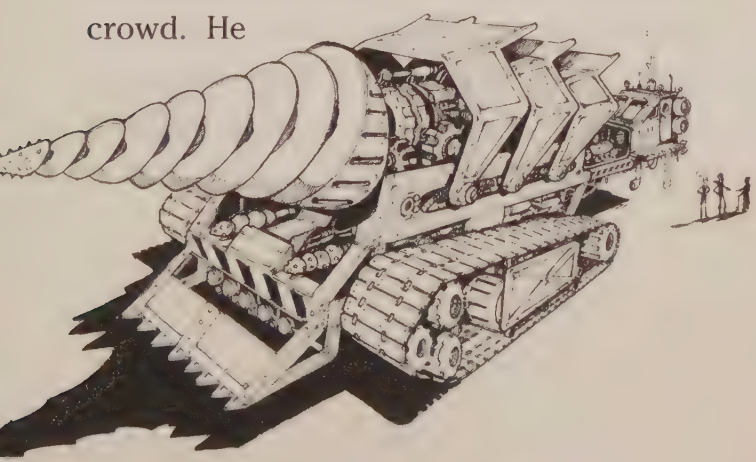
"Good luck, Red!" Shark Boy said, raising his hand in a kind of salute.

At the edge of the crowd, a giant red bear wearing a white shirt-collar and blue

necktie waved back, a bearish grin on its muzzle.

At their request, the Imagineer had interceded in the matter of the Red Menace, after he'd cleared Shark Boy and Lava Girl of all charges. The old bear, now with a set of false teeth in its head, stood in the company of the other animals of Down Town, surrounded by mice, ducks, dogs, and pigs. It had a place with them, now, and in its collar and tie, actually seemed to fit in.

"Maybe now they won't be scared of old dreams anymore," Shark Boy said to himself before turning away from the crowd. He



climbed into the cockpit of the Under-Rider, next to Lava Girl.

"Are you sure you don't have to get back to Vent?" Shark Boy said, powering up the Under-Rider's engines.

"No," Lava Girl said. "We've got time. Besides, we're heading down into the heart of Planet Drool, where all the lava comes from. Maybe while we're down there we'll find the secret of my past, too."

Shark Boy smiled.

"I hope so," he said, and fired up the drill.

With a massive puff of steam, the Under-Rider moved forward on its tank-treads and then angled down, the drill biting into the solid rock. They were on their way.

The adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl continue in
Book 3:
The Deep Sleep

ABOUT ROBERT RODRIGUEZ

Robert Rodriguez loves family and stories, and often puts them together. Growing up in a family of ten kids (!) he started making movies when he was 12 years old, and made an award winning short film called ***Bedhead*** starring his brothers and sisters. In college he drew a comic strip for his school newspaper based on his younger sister. Later, he made the ***Spy Kids*** movies, which had many characters based on his family. He's just finished making ***The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl in 3-D***—based on the stories and dreams of his son Racer Max—which introduces audiences to the heroes of Planet Drool.

ABOUT CHRIS ROBERSON

Chris Roberson used to write just science fiction stories for grown-ups, and even won awards for them, but now that he got the chance to co-write the ***Shark Boy and Lava Girl Adventures***, he thinks he'll be writing more stuff for kids. His first novel, ***Here, There & Everywhere***, is about a girl who gets the ability to travel anywhere in time and space, and older kids who enjoyed this book might want to check it out. Chris and his wife Allison live with their little girl Georgia Rose in a big house filled with lots of books.

ABOUT ALEX TOADER

Alex Toader draws things for a living, sometimes using pen and markers, sometimes brushes, and sometimes a computer and mouse. He's also been known to sculpt maquettes and props, from time to time. His conceptual designs for characters, vehicles, and environments have appeared in movies like the ***Spy Kids*** trilogy and ***The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl in 3-D***, and a number of video games. Alex draws all the time, even when he doesn't have to, but on those rare occasions when he's not drawing he's busy playing with his kids.

Searching for clues about
his missing father,
Shark Boy and his companion
Lava Girl return to
The Realm of Dreams.
Beneath the surface of Planet Drool,
though, they find more than
they'd counted on, when attacked
by the monster known only as
The Red Menace,
and taken prisoner in the
lost city of Down Town.

P9-AUK-817

Ages Seven and Up

DIMENSION FILMS

Cover Design by Alex Toader
Cover copyright © 2005
Troublemaker Publishing

TROUBLEMAKER PUBLISHING

www.sharkboyandlavagirl.com

ISBN 1-933104-0
51

9 781933 104058

US $10.95 / $13.95